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# Reevaluating the Sublime in Art through the Use of Language and Text

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Re-evaluating the Sublime in Art through the use of Language and Text  
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## SECTION 1: Introduction to the Sublime

The phenomenon of the sublime experience has been in existence since the days of the ancient Greeks and, for the last five centuries, has encountered fluctuating prominence within the Western artistic tradition. The sublime feeling has seen multiple incarnations; it has been described as strictly transcendental, as a feeling of terror followed by awe and as discomfort in confronting mental limits followed by elation upon overcoming them. Despite the differences between these historical conceptions, they are just variations on a common base feeling, that of being simultaneously overwhelmed and exalted. It is the feeling of confronting something that is new, unfamiliar and immense (either physically or conceptually). The sublime is an exceedingly powerful feeling that has been associated with the most formidable human experiences such as death and the divine. It is largely considered the culmination of all the most moving human emotions.

In all its elaborations, the sublime is a highly subjective experience that is found in the mind of the viewer, and not in the object being viewed. Being tied with the concept of that which is “unfamiliar” and its seat in the mind of the audience, the sublime then, cannot be permanently aligned with anything. Whatever triggers the sublime experience is constantly changing. Philosophers who have delved into the sublime can only give vague guidelines as to what can properly be called sublime, there is no way to instruct someone in how to encapsulate the feeling of the sublime in a specific and concrete form. Nonetheless, various artists have pursued the goal of awakening the sublime experience within the viewer. Since the Baroque era, artists of (Western) Europe and North America have been attempting to depict the sublime through visual means, which has led to a regular cycle of transformation in the nature of sublime art as artists interpret sublime philosophy and are shaped by popular aesthetic tastes.

What sets the idea of the sublime apart from an art movement is an elasticity that arises from a rebellion against form. This elasticity has allowed the sublime to adapt, evolve and largely retain meaning as a concept, despite the waxing and waning of the art movements it has been associated with. The sublime fell out of

favor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but has managed to work its way back into the art lexicon. With the sudden explosion of usage of the term “sublime” accompanying the glut of visual information available today, it is important to step back and truly examine what it means for something to be “sublime”.

One aim of this paper is to examine five prominent descriptions of the sublime that have proliferated over the centuries. These descriptions will be elucidated in regards to their most influential aspects and how artists interpreted and applied them in their search to evoke the sublime experience. Painting is the medium in focus within this short history, as painters took up the search for the sublime most energetically. The five descriptions of the sublime to be examined within this paper correspond to discrete eras. These descriptions are; the Longinian sublime, which influenced the Baroque era in Europe; the Burkean sublime, which largely influenced the Romantic era in Britain; the Kantian sublime, which corresponds with the American sublime in North America during the Romantic era; the Schopenhauerian sublime, which provided the framework for the Dadaist anti-sublime; and finally, the sublime of the Abstract Expressionist movement in America as described by Barnett Newman.

By combining aspects from the five descriptions of the sublime mentioned earlier, I intend to make the case that language and text in art have the potential to evoke the sublime experience, especially when used to a humorous end. There is an extensive historical connection between the concept of the sublime and language that clashes with the efforts of artists to evoke the sublime. Both Burke and Pseudo-Longinus spoke extensively on the ability of spoken and written language to evoke the sublime, claiming it is far better suited for this purpose than visual arts. Kant touted the importance of formlessness in regards to the sublime experience, which was interpreted by Jean François Lyotard as proclaiming language to be sublime due to its infinite and formless nature. Schopenhauer spoke about the connection between humor and the sublime, particularly language-based humor that draws on incongruities to expose the absurdity of certain personal beliefs, causing the individual to laugh, but also recognize or reevaluate their patterns of thinking.

Linguistic sublimity was inimical to descriptions of the sublime experience as detailed in its first recorded description, written by Pseudo-Longinus. Pseudo-Longinus dealt with the sublime experience as a product of effective rhetoric or writing. To him, the sublime was a feeling of transcendence that lifted the audience to a more enlightened state of mind. The sublime experience makes real the words of the rhetorician in the minds of the audience. It so fully convinces the audience of the ideas the speaker or writer is espousing, that they walk away believing that they, the audience, came up with the ideas themselves. Therefore words have the ability to inspire the audience to a higher plane of thought and language is far more powerful than image because Pseudo-Longinus perceives it as a direct conduit to the audience's emotions and sensibilities (Longinus 35).

Edmund Burke continued the tradition, proclaiming the sublimity of language over the visual arts within his theory. He gives three specific reasons explaining the superiority of word to image in the evocation of the sublime experience. First, words are more adept at communicating emotions between individuals, allowing one person to feel more deeply the sentiments of the other. Secondly, words are not bound by the rules of reality; many fantastic and moving spectacles can take place in literature that are not possible in the real world. Finally, because of the sheer volume of words available, there are infinite combinations possible that impart new meanings to words. Unlike a painting, which, according to Burke, is static, depicting one scene and retaining a singular meaning, for all eternity, language is rarely fixed in its meaning. To Burke, the visual arts are too clear-cut to engender emotions strong enough to be called sublime. But since language functions outside of the rules of reality (it is not subject to the laws of physics) and contains infinite possible meanings, it has a far greater potential to provoke dramatic emotional reactions (Burke 174).

Important interpretations of Immanuel Kant's sublime by philosopher and cultural critic Jean François Lyotard contain the idea that language is indeed sublime because of its connection to the infinite. Philosopher Immanuel Kant emphasized the importance of formlessness and the infinite in his description of the sublime. Just as Pseudo-Longinus believed, Kant also espouses the idea that the

sublime lies only in the mind of the viewer and not in the form of the object. That which is infinite is perceived to be sublime because it stretches the limits of human comprehension. What appears to be infinite overwhelms the audience with its immensity, but upon comprehending what appears to be infinite, the mind of the viewer is exalted at the triumph of their own abilities. Lyotard claimed that this emphasis on the combination of formlessness and infinity describes language because words contain a vast number of meanings beyond their dictionary definition. Through association, context, tone, personal experience etc, words can impart an infinite number of feelings and sensations on the viewer as they struggle to figure out what is being said. The exaltation comes when come to a meaning that makes sense to them, that puts all the pieces together (Lyotard 66).

Arthur Schopenhauer's observations on humor and its relation to the sublime were novel. Schopenhauer contends that a joke is composed of incongruities, and laughter or other pleasant reactions are provoked when the audience recognizes this incongruity in the joke. The incongruity juxtaposes that which is real with that which is considered ridiculous or impossible (unreal), the stark contrast between the two elements serves to amplify the ridiculousness of what is unreal, constituting the joke. The sublime comes into play when there is solemnity underlying the joke, when there is a fundamental truth or a challenge to deeply held beliefs underlying the humor. The real portion of the incongruity turns out to be proven ridiculous and the unreal turns out to be rational. Sublime humor challenges the belief system or worldview of the audience, taxing their sense of self and persuading them to consider as true the perceptions they once thought ridiculous (Schopenhauer 99).

Finally, painter Barnett Newman's exploration of the sublime and its popular depiction throughout art history frees the sublime from the figural and instates a doctrine of formlessness. He contends that the European artistic tradition of the sublime fails in its aims because it relies to heavily on a figural approach that is beholden to the Greek ideals of beauty, which is antithetical to the sublime. The sublime is an emotion of the unfamiliar and by associating it with recognizable figures, objects or themes; artists of the past have stunted its full potential. Newman

calls for the sublime in America to reject the European tradition of figural pursuits of the sublime and embrace a style that is not clouded by references to the physical world and draws only on emotion and revelation (Landau 137).

Coupling Kant and Lyotard's contributions with Schopenhauer's observations on the sublime nature of humor and Newman's liberation of the sublime from form and figure, I will argue that art employing text or an amalgamation of text and image has the potential to evoke the sublime experience. This paper is split into two sections. This paper is organized into four main sections; an introduction followed by section two, which contains a brief synopsis of sublime theory, its relation to art history and case studies of specific artworks that exemplify the idea of the sublime in a given era. The third section explains why past artistic approaches to the sublime are outdated and how these five descriptions of the sublime can be reworked to find a new and more effective approach by utilizing text and humor within art making to evoke the sublime experience. The fourth, and final, section addresses my own artwork and how it functions to convey a textual sublime as I have described it.

## SECTION 2: The Ebb and Flow of the Sublime Throughout Philosophy and Art History.

The first detailed description of the sublime can be traced back to an ancient Greek treatise titled *Peri Hypsous*, written in the first century AD ("Longinus"). Authorship of *Peri Hypsous*, later translated as *On the Sublime*, is attributed to Pseudo-Longinus, a Greek philosopher and literary critic from the first century AD. Pseudo-Longinus described the sublime as a tool of rhetoric, something that talented orators and writers could employ to better persuade their audience through moral and emotional appeals. His treatise is a piece of literary criticism that carefully examines the work of poets such as Homer, Plato and Demosthenes: analyzing their use of language and how it accomplishes a transmission of emotions and ideas from author to audience. Pseudo-Longinus extrapolates his formulation of the sublime from his analysis of the effective literary devices and styles that these authors employed in their most moving work. His concept of the sublime is one of

transcendence and inspiration that moves the audience to act in a moral and enlightened way. The most important aspects of Pseudo-Longinus' sublime (also known as the Longinian sublime) are that of "loftiness" or the elevation of the mind, its relation to language, and the aspect of the sublime experience as being not inherent in the object, but in the mind of the audience.

Pseudo-Longinus outlines five conditions for the sublime experience; "...the most important is the first, that is, a certain lofty cast of mind" (Longinus 15). The sublime Pseudo-Longinus describes is one in which the audience is elevated to a more refined mindset, lifted towards the heavens by the passions that resound in the orator's speech or the writer's words (69). According to Pseudo-Longinus, a successful oration "...does not merely convince the hearer, but enthralls him" (35, 36). The Longinian sublime is meant to inspire the audience and seed their mind with ideas through a process he refers to as giving "elevation" to a subject (26). This is evident in the passage from *On the Sublime*: "It is natural for us to feel our souls lifted up by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read" (12). The idea of "elevation" corresponds with morality; the Longinian sublime is akin to feelings of righteousness and heightened sense of morality.

The sublime that Pseudo-Longinus details in Peri-Hypsous is an inspirational sublime, where the audience's morals and feelings are roused by the vivid images conjured by the words of a skilled rhetorician. In her essay *Longinus and the Baroque Sublime in Britain*, Lydia Hamlett describes the goal of the Longinian sublime as to lead the audience to "see what the orator described within their mind's eye" (Hamlett). The rhetorician plants the seed in the mind of the audience from which the image blooms. This places the sublime experience within the mind of the viewer, and not necessarily in the words of the speaker, or the text in front of the reader.

Pseudo-Longinus thus describes the sublime as highly subjective in nature, allowing for a base of maximum flexibility and adaptability to undergird the idea of the sublime and ensure its survival. All future descriptions of the sublime pull from Pseudo-Longinus' provision of subjectivity. It is this groundwork of subjectivity; of

residence in the mind of the viewer and not as a trait of the object itself, that allows the sublime to persist despite changing aesthetic tastes and ideologies of the audience. It is one of the most important and enduring aspects of the sublime.

“Elevation” and “loftiness” as necessary for the sublime experience are of critical importance to the Longinian sublime’s legacy within both art and philosophy. “Elevating” the audience to a higher and inspired state of mind was the main goal of the Catholic Counter Reformation in their crusade to utilize the power of art to restore faith in the Catholic Church in the face of the Protestant Reformation. The absorption of this central tenet of the Longinian sublime yielded an era of grandiose artworks, which relied on a subject matter that fused myth, religion and history in a grandiose style to evoke a sublime experience in an effort to inspire faith.

The Longinian sublime ascribes the sublime experience to rhetoric only; language and text are the original vehicles for the sublime experience. This focus on language reflects the cultural importance of rhetoric during the age that Longinus was writing his treatise; ancient Greece. Public speaking was a prized and cultivated skill that Greek statesmen were groomed to possess. Speaking in the public forum, one had to persuade, to move the audience, and in an era stripped bare of all the technological accouterments available today, careful choice of words and a passionate delivery was the only tool available.

The sublime experience that Longinus describes, though, is not the same as the “sublime style”, which, in Cicero’s rhetoric of stylistic gradation, is characterized by complex and acrobatic language (Gilby, 2013). “...the most homely language is sometimes far more vivid than the most ornamental, being recognized at once as the language of common life, and gaining its currency by its familiarity” (Longinus 57). Simple and concise language is just as conducive, if not more so, to the sublime experience. In fact, Longinus decries “bombast” and overblown statements as being characteristic of a false sublime.

“Speaking generally, it would seem that bombast is one of the hardest things to avoid in writing. For all those writers who are ambitious of a lofty style, through dread of being



convicted of feebleness and poverty of language, slide by a natural gradation into the opposite extreme" (Longinus 6).

His recognition of the power of carefully chosen, if sparse, wording influences the aesthetic of the sublime experience in Protestant Britain during the Baroque era. That the understated can be just as moving as the ornate, sets the tone for an oscillating sublime aesthetic in painting spanning from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>th</sup> century, which embraces spectacle, only to eschew it for simplistic representation.

Pseudo-Longinus thus describes the sublime experience as a phenomenon that lies dormant in the mind of the audience to be awakened by the power of language from a skilled writer or rhetorician. Longinus' sublime is a feeling of inspiration that spurs the audience to assume an elevated and highly moralistic manner of thinking and acting. It is not the words themselves that are sublime, but their manipulation by the orator so to provoke inspiration within the mind of the audience. This initial conception of the sublime by Longinus bears significant influence in that it espouses formlessness, the prominence of language and the feeling of transcendence. These tenets resurface within the sublime as formulated by the philosophers of the Romantic era, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. More immediately, Longinus' description of the sublime exerted a profound effect on the art of Western Europe during the Baroque era.

The Longinian description of the sublime bears striking resemblance to the aims of the Catholic Church and Catholic Counter-Reformation in shaping the aesthetics and purpose of art in the Baroque era (~1600-1725). Longinus' prescriptions for the sublime show uncanny similarities to the strategies of the Catholic Church, who was, at the time, launching the counter-reformation in attempts to discredit the critiques of Martin Luther and restore the glory of the church. The Counter-reformation sought to employ art to restore faith in Catholicism through highly emotional appeals that emphasized the glorious history of the church and the paradise that awaits devout followers. This artistic campaign ran from about 1560 through 1700 and sought to highlight the theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, focusing on the mysteries of faith and lives of holy figures. As Lydia Hamlett describes "...the function of much

Counter Reformation art was not only to persuade the viewer of the power and truth of Roman Catholicism but also, crucially, to move them to become active in their faith, to behave in a more enlightened and religiously conscious manner” (Hamlett).

The Council of Trent, which convened between 1545 and 1563, clearly supports Hamlett’s observations about the aims of counter-reformation artwork. Passages from the council of Trent, as quoted by Kevin V. Mulcahy in his article on the cultural policy of the counter-reformation, specify that art should be employed to remind the audience of their faith.

“At its final session in December 1563, the Council of Trent decreed that: By means of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people be instructed and confirmed in the habit of remembering and continually resolving in mind the articles of faith” (Mulcahy).

Thus a large portion of the art created during the Baroque period was for the purpose of making intense emotional appeals in order to persuade an audience to believe a specific doctrine. In this way, art influenced by the Counter Reformation shares intense ties with rhetoric (in this case Catholic rhetoric). Hamlett recognizes this in her essay:

“Baroque art and sublime rhetoric shared not only the same goal but also the methods by which to achieve it...Since the 1950’s Baroque art has frequently been described as the visual counterpart to the literature and rhetoric of the Catholic Counter Reformation...” (Hamlett).

Despite assertions by scholars such as Samuel H. Monk, who contend that Longinus’ work lived mostly in obscurity until the 1674 publishing of Nicolas Boileau’s translation titled *OEuvres diverses, avec le Traité du Sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours, traduit du grec de Longin*, there is evidence to support the argument that there was an awareness of the Longinian sublime well before Boileau. In her book *Sublime Worlds: Early Modern French Literature*, Emma Gilby details the prominence of the Longinian sublime before Boileau’s translation. “Well before Boileau’s translation, then, the themes and motifs of Longinus’ treatise were available to writers in the vernacular” (Gilby 4). The Italian translation by Giovanni di Niccolo da Falgano was the earliest vernacular version of the text, published in 1575 (2). Also to predate Boileau, John Hall published an English version of *Peri*

*Hypsous* in 1652 (2). Library catalogues from the early seventeenth century show the availability of multiple copies of Longinus' treatise in various prestigious French libraries (such as the Du Thou Library) (2). Longinus' work was also often referred to by those in the *Respublica Litteraria* (the Republic of Letters) and appeared in many of their works published in the time between the initial 1554 publishing of *Peri Hypsous* and Boileau's translation (3).

Finally and most consequential, Longinus was "...profoundly important to and widely conveyed by, Jesuit rhetoricians..." and *Peri Hypsous* corresponded especially well to their interests "...in a rhetoric of vividness: the communicative potential of the arts, [and] their ability to have an affect on audiences, moving and involving them" (3). In the years following the Council of Trent, with the church making "...a move to occupy the whole of social and political space..." the importance of Longinian ideas to the Jesuits could have been the key to the integration of tenets of the Longinian sublime into the arts (3).

Even with "...no consolidated "theory" of the sublime associated with the aesthetics of the Baroque..." the threads that tie the Baroque era to the Longinian Sublime are far from tenuous (Castillo, Lollini 227). The Baroque style is described as impacting a viewer's "emotional susceptibilities" and exhibiting "...a sense of overwhelming power, a profound intensity, limitless vitality and heavenly grandeur" ...where "[T]he beholder is stimulated to participate actively in the supra-natural manifestations of the mystic art rather than to look at it "from outside" (Mulcahy 132, 134). Furthermore, there is a reiteration of the idea of "transcendence" throughout both form and subject matter employed by Baroque art. These aspects make up the main tenets of the Longinian description of the sublime and are most prominently displayed in the Baroque era practice of ceiling murals that combined religion and illusion to provoke the notion of transcendence.

Grandiose ceiling frescos, which capitalize on the techniques of *quadratura*<sup>1</sup> and *di sotto in su*<sup>2</sup>, which, when combined, create the illusion that a ceiling extends

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<sup>1</sup> The technique of merging 3 dimensional architectural aspects of a space with 2-dimensional painted architectural elements to make the space appear larger.

into the heavens; physically exemplify the idea of transcendence. Two prime examples of these divine ceilings are those in the church of St. Ignazio di Loyola and the Palazzo Barberini in Rome, Italy. The *Allegory of the Missionary Work of the Jesuits* (fig. 1) by Andrea Pozzo (Italian, b. 1642-1709) in the church of St. Ignazio di Loyola is a seminal piece of art from the High Roman Baroque era and a prime example of Catholic-Counter reformation rhetoric displayed in the visual arts. The 95'x55' ceiling fresco depicts saints and allegorical characters gathering to celebrate the life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Through the use of vertically inclined architectural elements, Pozzo emphasizes the transition from earthly life to Christian paradise (Bazin 106). The ceiling opening into the heavens and revealing St. Ignatius being apotheosized by Jesus gives the viewer a front-row seat to divine processes and includes the viewer in the scene. This inclusion of the viewer corresponds directly with the Longinian prescription of direct-address.

“Such a direct personal address always has the effect of placing the reader in the midst of the scene of action. And by pointing your words to the individual reader, instead of to the readers generally...you will rouse interest, fix attention, and make him a partaker in the action...” (Longinus 52).

Pietro Da Cortona's (Italian, b. 1596-1669) *Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power* (fig. 2) in the Palazzo Barberini is another exemplary work of a ceiling fresco from the Baroque period. Da Cortona was an important artistic contributor to the Catholic Counter Reformation. Da Cortona's ceiling depicts pagan deities, such as Hercules and Minerva, but they are compositionally subordinated to the Christian values of Peace, Justice and Wisdom. The arrangement of the pagan myths around the edge of the fresco is meant to demonstrate that the ancient pagan gods have been subsumed beneath the infinitely greater power of the Christian virtues. Present in the center of the ceiling are the Barberini bees, both a symbol of the Barberini family, but also a symbol of divine providence.

Da Cortona's piece is saturated with meaning; with every figure and their relationship with the surrounding elements, the fresco congeals to into a rich text

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<sup>2</sup> Or “seen from below”; the technique in which a work is created with the intention of being viewed from a specific vantage point to produce the full effect.

that sings the praises of the Barberini family, Pope Urban VIII and, above all, the Catholic Church. Most importantly, the story is not constructed two-dimensionally; it does not exist only on the ceiling. What is meant by this is each character and element is attached to long-standing myth or religious significance, they have a backstory that extends well beyond their placement on the Barberini ceiling, and this backstory dictates how such a ceiling can be interpreted. The ceiling is allegorical; representing far more than is visible on its surface. In this way it mimics a rhetorical style, and just as the rhetorician sought to inspire an image in the mind of the audience, Da Cortona's ceiling seeks to inspire further visions of religious majesty and the infinite power of the divine; reminding the viewer of the Godly realm.

In these two examples from prominent Baroque artists Da Cortona and Pozzo, there appear significant ties to the sublime described in *Peri Hypsous*. Displays of intense emotion and passion, a goal of elevation or transcendence and the use of a pictorial style that speaks through allegory and recalls rhetoric are all aspects manifest themselves in both Pozzo and Da Cortona's work and Pseudo-Longinus' treatise. With the modest popularity of *Peri Hypsous*, at least in the intellectual spheres, it would be hard to believe that the evocation of a sublime experience was not at all considered during the creation of Baroque era works of art under the Catholic Counter Reformation. It seems highly likely that the Catholic Church espoused the prescription of the Longinian sublime, perhaps not making the explicit connection to Longinus himself.

The sublime as described by Longinus appears to have a strong presence within the art of the Catholic Counter Reformation as exhibited through the style and subject matter employed in these paintings. But, as often happens, a shift in popular aesthetics applied pressure for change. The early 18<sup>th</sup> century sees an abrupt reversal take place in Britain, where the grandeur and spectacle of the Catholic Counter Reformation sublime is abandoned for a more simplistic style.

Turning to art theory penned by the highly influential British painter and art theorist Jonathan Richardson (1667-1745), Lydia Hamlett explores this shift to a

simplistic sublime in her essay *Longinus and the Baroque Sublime in Britain*. Hamlett notes that among the British

“...large scale artworks were pompous in their effects and thus reminiscent of Pseudo Longinus’ descriptions of bombast and the false sublime. There was an increasing sense from critics that the art displayed in aristocratic houses was no longer adequate in its effects...”  
(Hamlett).

Such a proclamation decries the approach to the sublime experience of works such as Da Cortona’s fresco in the Barberini’s family palace. The British aesthetic palate demonstrates a clear distaste towards gaudy displays that catered to the senses in such an obvious and pandering manner. “The early 18<sup>th</sup> century spectator had become increasingly ambivalent towards the effects of decorative history painting” (Hamlett). The dramatic and ornate style of the Catholic Counter Reformation Baroque was subverted by a more simplistic style that encapsulated a (Protestant) Britishness. (Hamlett).

Evidence for the shift in aesthetic taste can be found in Richardson’s composition on art theory titled *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715), which is credited as being the first significant work of artistic theory in English. In this examination of painting, Richardson muses on both stylistic and technical aspects of painting as well as connoisseurship, studying the work of contemporary and historic artists. It is clear that Richardson’s concept of the sublime in this text is constructed from the Longinian sublime; he often references Longinus within *Essay* and refers to Boileau’s 1674 translation on *Peri Hypsous*. Furthermore, Richardson adopts Longinus’ attitudes on the uselessness of the absurd and ridiculous, the importance and power of the statement “Fiat Lux”<sup>3</sup> as the greatest example of sublime simplicity in language and the idea that the sublime is greatness of thought which fills the mind with a kind of dignity (Richardson, 230). Richardson examines painting through the lens of the Longinian sublime; therefore his theory in regards to the sublime is a perfect example of the influence of the artist on the interpretation and application of the sublime experience.

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<sup>3</sup> “Let There be Light”

Richardson's writings embraced morality and simplicity as being an important part in the creation of the sublime (Hamlett).

"There is a beauty in brevity, and simplicity which sufficiently compensates for what it wants; the mind is fix'd as it were, to a point, and to the sense; whereas 'tis apt to be dissipated by the allurements of a Florid style..." (Richardson 245).

Richardson observes the sublime in painting to arise from the harmony created between the figures depicted and the morality of virtue with which the painter's rendering imbues them.

"This I esteem sublimity in painting...if a Noble character is given or improv'd; a character of Wisdom, Goodness, Magnanimity, or whatever other virtues, or excellencies; and that together with a Just and Proper Resemblance" (250).

Consequently, he deems only history painting and portraiture capable of being rendered in such a manner as to be sublime. (249). The artists he lauds as being capable of rendering the sublime through their attention to simplicity, dignity and virtue in their work include Rembrandt Van Rijn (Dutch b. 1606-1669), Anthony Van Dyke (Flemish b. 1599-1641), Michelangelo (Italian b. 1475-1564) and Raphael (Italian, b. 1483-1520). Technical skill combines with choice of proper subject matter in the work of such artists, creating a dynamic whole that transcends the human realm. In Richardson's assessment of the sublime in painting, the High Italian Renaissance artist Raphael is the standard to which all artists are compared in their attempts at the sublime (Hamlett). The only contemporary artist to consistently rank alongside Raphael, in Richardson's opinion, is Rembrandt. "...The coloring of Rubens and Van Dyck falls short of that of Titian, and Correggio; and the Best masters have rarely thought like Rafaëlle, or compos'd like Rembrandt" (Richardson 260).

Rembrandt's portraits in particular, speak to the simplistic sublime that Richardson finds so important to the British Protestant aesthetic. For example, in his portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert (fig 3), a Dutch cleric Rembrandt elevates the character of Johannes through lighting, gesture and composition. The moment captured is one of interrupted study, as the subject appears slightly startled, as if we, the viewer, had just alerted Wtenbogaert to our presence through a creaking floorboard or a clearing of the throat. Wtenbogaert's pose seems transitory, as

though he is in the midst of moving and this painting is only a freeze frame from a larger collection of images. Rembrandt mirrors, through the placement of the hands, the pose of Saint Catherine of Alexandria by Raphael, in his 1507 painting christened with her name (fig 4). This particular arrangement of the hands, one cradling the heart while the other rests on the lower torso, conveys piety and the sanctity of the heart in Christian tradition. Through the placement of the hands, Rembrandt strongly communicates the righteous moral character of the subject and this strong sense of morality is inimical to the simplistic, moral sublime in painting, as espoused by Richardson.

The lighting and coloration of the Wtenbogaert portrait further heightens the sublimity of the painting. Rembrandt works in his iconic color palette of a muted, yet luminous, realism, using color and light to emphasize identifying artifacts in the portrait; namely the heads, hands and the large volume resting on the podium. A heavy and dark robe obscures Wtenbogaert's body, negating his human form; heightening his spirituality and other-worldliness through the denial of his earthly form. That Wtenbogaert's head, hands and literature are rendered in full detail and even made luminous, speak to his intellectual nature and wisdom. The blinding white ruff encircling his neck further distinguishes the head from the body in a way that speaks of sterility and partition, as though it is a barrier separating the corporeal from the spiritual.

While the messages of spirituality and an elevated consciousness are present in Rembrandt's portraiture and the work of the other artists mentioned in Richardson's theory, there is a clear departure from the spectacle in Baroque art of the Catholic Counter Reformation. Wtenbogaert's portrait, as an example of a simplistic Protestant sublime, is not the uncontested glory and power of the church itself, but the quiet wisdom and dignity of the individuals who compose it. Protestantism's prominence in Britain during the 18<sup>th</sup> century inspired a shift in the aesthetic of the sublime that prompted artists and critics to search for it in the elevation of familiar and common subject matter. This sublime was one of "simplicity of color and technique and embodying moral ideas" (Hamlett 2013).



Jonathan Richardson captures and explains this shift in his *Essay*, putting into words the popular aesthetic conception of the sublime during 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

Within the span of the Baroque era only, the sublime experience is interpreted through two very different guises; both of which are derived from the Longinian sublime. The effect of religion and changing popular aesthetics buoyed up a grandiose vision of the sublime, only to strip it bare in favor of a quiet dignity. The angles from which artists have approached the sublime have been dichotomous in nature, from the painted heavens of Andrea Pozzo, to the solemn portraiture of Rembrandt. The next era of the sublime, the Romantic, is rekindled by the power of nature and the words of philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

Irish author, orator, political theorist and philosopher Edmund Burke (b. 1729-1797) and German philosopher Immanuel Kant (b. 1724-1804) were both enamored by the idea of the sublime. Before the year 1800, Burke and Kant both published respective treatises on the sublime. While Burke was arguably more influential on the sublime of the Romantic era in Britain (roughly 1800-1850), the Kantian sublime can be found in the American sublime (1820-1880) and even more so in the work of the Abstract Expressionists of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Shortly before the beginning of the Romantic Era (~1800 – 1850) the idea of the sublime underwent a transformation that sculpted it into a shape more familiar to the modern individual. This version of the sublime was highly influential to the aesthetics of the Romantic era and guided artists such as JMW Turner (British b.1775-1851), John Martin (British, b. 1789-1854) and Caspar David Friedrich (German, b. 1774-1840) in their style and subject matter as they pursued the sublime experience. Philosopher Edmund Burke catalyzed this change through his work *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). His alteration of the sublime shifts its nature from the transcendental phenomenon as described by Longinus, to an experience of shock and awe as a destabilizing force. Burke contends that this destabilization takes place when the self confronts something that seems to endanger its own survival. The self battles near-annihilation and in doing so, finds pleasure in the experience. At its most dramatic and condensed description, the Burkean sublime is to come face to face

with death, and yet come out alive and rejoicing The Sublime experience as conceived by Burke is a highly physiological one that emphasizes the power of terror and the paralysis of reason. Burke's most important contributions to the theory of the sublime are his emphasis on terror; his incorporation of infinity into the lexicon of the sublime and his notion the language will always be the ultimate vehicle for the sublime experience.

The Burkean concept of the Sublime is identified by various scholars as being antagonistic to thought and reason; its emphasis on the importance of fear and terror actually "robs the mind" of its reasoning capacities (Ryan 271). In Burke's own words, "[i]n this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (Burke 57). A sublime experience utterly takes over the mind, precluding any opportunity for reason or reflection upon the object. Thus the Burkean Sublime can be aptly labeled "physiological" rather than psychological. This is in stark contrast to Kant, who emphasized the role of reason and focuses mainly on how the mind understands and receives the Sublime experience.

The Burkean Sublime focuses on the reaction of the self to certain objects and sensations that threaten personal safety and jeopardize self-preservation. These objects and sensations produce terror, which functions as "... in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime" (78). Burke makes a point to explain that what is not necessarily dangerous in reality, can still provoke feelings of terror; one does not have to be in physical danger, only perceived danger, to experience the sublime. Burke's list of what can provoke terror includes (but is not limited to) Obscurity (not knowing the full extent of danger), Power (a force that nothing can withstand), Privation (darkness, silence, solitude etc), Vastness (greatness of dimension, extent or quantity), Infinity, Magnitude ("A great profusion of things which are splendid or valuable in themselves...") and less significant others (78). The Burkean sublime thus exists predominantly as a feeling of terror (to some degree) provoked by an object or sensation; but real danger is not necessary, only the perceived threat. "A mode of terror, or of pain, is always the cause of the sublime" (136).

The Burkean Sublime, by deemphasizing reason and the mind, provokes a visceral reaction. In his essay *Stubbs, Walpole and Burke: Convulsive Imitation and 'Truth Extorted'* written for the Tate Museum's extensive investigation into the sublime, Arias Sarafinos describes, concisely, the Burkean Sublime as a process of "...violent physiological reflexes" and terror (Sarafinos). "The ability to hurt and insubordination to human utility are essential properties of the Burkean Sublime" (Sarafinos). Insubordination to human will and the emphasis on the physical primed the Burkean sublime for a strong relationship with natural phenomena. The majority of the examples he employs in *A Philosophical Enquiry* to illustrate the various objects of terror are aspects of the natural world. Dark woods, the vast ocean and terrible animals are his illustrations of choice to represent what can cause the objects and sensations of terror. The sublime is that which is beyond human understanding and control, just like nature, against which man struggles, but will forever be overpowered. This emphasis on nature and its terrible powers migrated into the world of painting as the art of the Romantic era contains hundreds of examples of vast landscapes and depictions of man's vulnerability in the face of nature.

Burke's addition of the infinite and the vast to the lexicon of the sublime had a profound effect on its subsequent configurations in both art and theory. Burke contends that the idea of infinity is the "...most affecting we have", it is the most destabilizing to the individual because it brings with it uncertainty (Burke 63). Burke argues that an object that presents itself to the mind by utterly taking it over with its greatness, or vastness, makes an approach towards the infinite, therefore inspiring terror and evoking the sublime (63). In the true style of the Burkean sublime, this uncertainty provokes terror through the possibility of annihilation or death. Burke points to the ocean as the epitome of the infinite: when comparing the vastness of the land to that of the ocean he asks, "...can it ever fill the mind with any thing so great as the ocean itself?" (58). This oceanic vastness is employed by artists such as JMW Turner<sup>4</sup>, Caspar David Friedrich<sup>5</sup> and Ivan Aivazovsky<sup>6</sup> (Russian, b.

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<sup>4</sup> See Fig. 5 *The Shipwreck*

1817-1900) to great effect, in their depictions of unconquerable oceans and seafaring vessels at the mercy of the waves.

Infinity encapsulates, in a comprehensible word, unending and untamable nature. It distills that which incomparably dwarfs a human lifetime, and diminishes the power of man, into a concept that can be applied to the mortal realm. The aforementioned artists took full liberty of this condensation and its connection to the sublime experience. By identifying the infinite as a crucial aspect of the sublime, Burke unlocked an important facet of nature; naming it, so it may be channeled through the brush by a skilled hand and a grand vision. The obsession of these artists with the ocean demonstrates their awareness of the Burkean description of the sublime and how they chose to depict it in paint.

Burke's sublime subsumes from Longinus, an emphasis on the written or spoken word, "...yet words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and of the sublime as any of those [painting and architecture]; and sometimes a much greater than any of them" (163). Words have a far greater potential for the sublime due to three conditions recognized by Burke. The first being "...that we take an extraordinary part in the passions of others...", the second is that "...there are many things of a very affecting nature which can seldom occur in reality, but the words which represent them often do..." (173). Finally, "...by words we have it in our power to make such a combination as we cannot possibly do otherwise" (174). Language functions as a "strong expression" while physical objects are "clear expressions"; strong expressions belong to feelings and emotions while clear expressions belong to understanding (175). Thus Burke's sublime contends that there are some ideas that just cannot be conveyed through visual representation, the physical form of the object precludes an infinite access to emotion. It distinguishes between the capabilities of physical objects (including paintings) and concepts, to arouse strong emotions and evoke the sublime experience. "In painting we may represent any fine figure we please; but we never can give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words" (174). Physicality is too static

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<sup>5</sup> See Fig. 6 *The Sea of Ice*

<sup>6</sup> See Fig. 7 *The Ninth Wave*

to fully conjure the gamut and intensity of emotion required by the sublime, but words, with their ever-changing connotations, interchangeability and abstract nature are far more capable.

Artists such as JMW Turner and John Martin tackled the idea of near-annihilation and the Burkean sublime on their canvases, exposing the viewer to an experience throughout which the continuation of existence is questionable. Two paintings from their respective repertoires are particularly apt representations of the aesthetic and ideas of the Romantic sublime. These pieces are Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* and Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath*. Turner's piece exemplifies the height of the Romantic sublime, exhibited in 1812, while Martin's, when it is exhibited in 1853, is received less than enthusiastically, signaling a waning in popular support for the terrible naturalism of the Burkean sublime.

In Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, (fig. 8) the viewer is confronted with the question of a looming catastrophe into which they are inserted, and yet remain removed from. The composition of the piece is such that one is almost blindsided by the cause of danger, the snowstorm. Upon seeing the painting, the eye is immediately drawn to the floating sun on the lighter, left side, only to be arrested by the shadow that is arching up from below and threatening the left side of the pictorial space with the same fate as has befallen the right side; to be consumed by a tumultuous darkness. The army cowering the bottom of the frame can do nothing but wait and tremble as they watch the snowstorm roll in. Despite their power as a military force, the army is defenseless against the elements; the blizzard is a foe that cannot be vanquished by steel. That it is Hannibal's army, the army of one of the greatest military commanders of all time, speaks even more forcefully of nature's destructive potential. Not even an army, the most formidable force men can summon, can stand up to the power of a blizzard.

*Hannibal's* sublimity arises from the audience's teetering on the edge of demise. The initial reaction is one of fear upon comprehending the seriousness of the situation, upon identifying with the peril that the figures of the painting are experiencing. There is a shift that takes place though, as the revelation takes place

that there is no actual danger, only the sensation of danger. The viewer is not subject to the possibility of annihilation; they are free to contemplate the ferocity of nature from the safety of the gallery space. Upon this realization, the viewer is allowed to revel in their ability to admire the power of nature while being free from the threat of annihilation by it.

John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath* (fig. 9) is an unabashed expression of the destructive and overwhelming potential of nature as a vehicle of divine power. This piece functions as an allegorical landscape that melds a divine morality play with the terrifying potential of nature to further amplify the sublime experience of the viewer. The scene depicted is one of apocalyptic proportions, with the earth folding in upon itself as the mountaintops are struck down by lightning from the heavens. All the civilizations of the earth, and their grand cities that stood for thousands of years, are cast into the volcanic void that opens up in the middle of the canvas. The damned go tumbling into the black abyss near the bottom of the frame, never to escape. The viewer is made spectator to the wrath of God and nature and from their perspective standing over the abyss, teeters on the edge of annihilation, but yet remains above the catastrophe, watching it unfold from a safe distance.

Martin's efforts though, were not received with necessarily the same reverence and respect they were intended to evoke. Created as a triptych, the other two pieces contain additional allegorical landscapes that depict the last judgment and the plains of heaven. The works were sent on a grand tour upon their completion, being exhibited in Britain, Ireland, North America and Australia. Beyond that, they were reproduced as engravings and circulated worldwide (Myrone). The conventions Martin employed in his pursuit of the sublime were those pioneered by JMW Turner and earlier landscape painters like Claude Lorrain (French, b. 1600-1682). Audience exposure to such conventions had rendered their effect near useless, as viewers, by the mid 1800's saw Martin's style as formulaic (Myrone).

This Romantic sublime of Britain thus waned as viewers turned a cold-shoulder to the now-predictable aesthetic tendencies of the sublime as depicted by artists like Turner and Martin. The landscape of the British Romantic era had become formulaic and tired, and artists began to pursue more objectively beautiful

subjects as evidenced by the art of the Victorian era in Britain. High Victorian Classicist painters such as Sir Edward John Poynter and Frederic Lord Leighton, who flourished in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, painted scenes of idealized life in ancient Greek, Rome and Egypt. Take for example, Poynter's *The Ionian Dance* (fig. 10) or Leighton's *Winding the Skein* (fig. 11). There is no trace of the Romantic sublime within these images, only the pleasant form of idealized female figures and the sentimental longing for a bygone era. The popularity of this style of painting that pervaded the popular Victorian aesthetic in Britain saw a waning of the sublime in Britain. However, across the Atlantic in North America, landscape painters were just discovering the power of the Romantic era sublime, but more in line with Immanuel Kant's description of the sublime.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant was a central figure of modern philosophy whose work largely concerned the relationship between reason and the human experience. The sublime formulated by Kant in 1790 is a sublime of reason and introspective transcendence. Kant shifted the focus of the sublime from the physiological to the psychological and delved deeper into the process of the sublime by organizing and labeling what he believed to take place within the viewer's consciousness during a sublime experience. Through this shift, Kant releases the sublime from the numerous restraints placed on it Burke: there was no need for the intense system of classification that Burke imposed upon the sublime since Kant choose to describe the sublime through over-arching principles, rather than listing all the specific feelings that compose it. As Stephen Vine puts very aptly in his book *Reinventing the Sublime: Post Romantic Literature and Theory*, the purpose of the Kantian sublime was to "...promote a sublime of rationality and imagination that is turned inwards (and upwards) in the contemplation of infinitude" (Vine 14).

Kant's sublime focuses on the effect the comprehension of vast ideas have on the way the faculties of reason and imagination interact within the mind of an individual. The sublime experience results from a tension between these faculties, as the limits of one are overcome to meet the demands of the other. Kant's emphasis on formlessness, the power of latent ideas and the incomprehensible nature of the infinite, are the most important aspects of his sublime. These aspects can be found

in the landscape paintings of the American sublime (1820-1880), a subtler mutation of the British Romantic sublime. The American sublime exhibits a departure from the Burkean doctrine of terror and the aesthetics of artists like Turner, to embrace a more simplified, even rational, approach; a shift that mirrors the Baroque shift in the previous era. This section of the paper will examine the most important tenets of the Kantian sublime and how they influenced American sublime painting.

Kant's concept of the sublime was described in detail in his work *The Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790. In its essence, Kant's sublime is a "...momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them" (Kant 83). It is the action of the mind recognizing its limits of understanding or comprehension and then exceeding them. The popular description of the Kantian sublime experience is a feeling of pleasure that can only be reached through an initial moment of mental anguish. In the sublime moment:

"...the mind is not merely attracted by the object but is ever being alternately repelled, the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much involve a positive pleasure, as admiration or respect, which rather deserves to be called negative pleasure" (Kant, 83).

Respect and admiration trump the Burkean necessity of terror; in fact, Kant holds that to call that which is sublime, merely terrible, is the reaction of an uneducated man (105). Rather, the Kantian sublime is centered on what is admirable or "absolutely great", great beyond all comparison (86). While that which is terrifying can be encompassed by the sublime, it is not the standard by which an experience is to be judged sublime.

The main goal of *The Critique of Judgment* and the section *The Analytic of the Sublime* in particular, is to define and systematize the mental processes that inform the individual as to what they are experiencing in the sublime moment. Through this process, Kant constructs the "formless" nature of his sublime. The act of judging<sup>7</sup> is the first step in the process of the sublime experience. Kant divides judgment into

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<sup>7</sup> The use of the *understanding* by which an *object* is determined to be *empirically* real, through a *synthesis* of *intuitions* and *concepts*. Most of the knowledge we gain through ordinary *experience*, or through science, is empirical. 'This table is brown' is a typical empirical statement. It is the act of determining the nature or form of an object.



two main types, Reflective judgment and Determinant judgment. The sublime stems from the Reflective category of judgment, for which the particular is given and the universal has to be found (15). In other words, the Reflective judgment is the human ability to recognize the unsaid rule that unites certain kinds of objects or sensations. An exercise in Reflective judgment would be to give an individual a collection of items that relate to birthday parties, or celebrations, and asking them to state what relates these items. The unifying principle is celebratory purpose, but that trait is not inherent in the form of the object, only evoked by its common use. Therefore, the judgment does not determine the individual nature of the objects; rather, it determines the nature of the objects in relation to a larger system of rules or classification.

This cognitive groundwork created by Kant invariably leads to its formlessness. The sublime is not provoked by a system that focuses on the *form* of any object, but its nature and relation to greater systems of rules; rules that govern ideas rather than objects. "All that we can say is that the object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity which can be found in the mind, for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called" (84). Just as Longinus before him believed, Kant's sublime too, does not lie in the object, rather "...true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the subject..." (84). The sublime is a purely subjective experience that depends on how an individual receives and processes stimuli; whether they are moved or not moved depends solely on their judgment. Due to its formlessness, there is no strict formula for the Kantian sublime; Kant's writings are a study of results, not a study of methods.

Since the sublime of Kant is not linked to the form of the object, that which provokes sublime experience does so by drawing on powerful latent ideas. These ideas are stirred within the consciousness of the viewer by the visual material given, but are not inherent in the object itself. "We may describe the sublime as thus: it is an object...the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of ideas" (108). This is to say that a representation of nature plain and simple cannot be ~~is~~ not sublime, but, to say, that the idea of nature as a constant cycle of birth and death that generates of

billions upon billions of life forms over a span of time is, because humans cannot comprehend its utter immensity. The representation of the object (in this case, nature) is saturated with powerful ideas that go beyond the object that is given, dwarfing the audience with their magnitude and implications.

Finally, the infinite is an aspect deeply inimical to the Kantian sublime. According to Kant, the sublime is that which is absolutely great, that which is great beyond all comparison. "The sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small" (88). This does not necessarily mean greatness of size, it simply means, that the sublime dwarfs, in some respect, everything that is familiar. This greatness makes it exceedingly difficult to comprehend the entire magnitude of the object in one single thought or intuition. The infinite, being that which is absolutely great, thwarts the mind of the individual and escapes comprehension through its incomparable magnitude. To understand what is infinite, the individual must turn to supersensible faculties where the infinite can be turned into a singularly comprehensible concept. The symbol for infinity is an apt example, it encompasses all that numerically exists, has ever existed and will ever exist, in one shape. If one is asked to imagine infinity, the first reaction would be to imagine the signature figure-eight.

We are unable to imagine that which is infinite in its true form because it is unfamiliar to humans as finite creatures. The infinite is antithetical to our most basic nature and beyond our comprehension. It overwhelms by confronting us with our own physical and mental limits, but at the same time, spurs us to understand it. This effort to understand, to comprehend that which is beyond comprehension through the power of physical senses, is the Kantian sublime. In considering that which is infinite, the mind moves beyond all standards of sense and towards that which is supersensible, or exists only intellectually. In other words, the imagination is stretched beyond its mental limits to encompass a new thought, experiencing uncertainty and discomfort as it travels into unknown territory. Upon comprehending the previously incomprehensible, the individual is elated by their accomplishment as the mind "...thus acquires an extension and a might greater than it sacrifices" (109).

The Kantian sublime corresponds to the depiction of the American wilderness by artists such as Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt and John Frederick Kensett. While the Romantic era sublime declined in Britain around 1850, landscape painters in North America, particularly those of the Hudson school and the Luminists, carried on the tradition of sublime naturalism, but with a different approach than that of Turner or Martin. The American sublime (1820-1880) focused less on terror and the threat of savage nature against the insignificance of man, and more on the transcendental experiences inherent in the timelessness of nature. Washington Allston (b. 1779-1843), an American painter and conduit through which the sublime entered American from Britain, describes the sublime as the “...ever stimulating, yet ever-eluding nature of experience that...the imagination cannot master and which will thus master imagination” (Wilton et al 20). Allston is channeling the Kantian sublime in his description in this synopsis, emphasizing the imagination and the mind, rather than a visceral reaction of terror.

Just as the sublime in the Baroque era shifted from grand spectacle to tempered nobility, the sublime of the Romantic era exhibits a similar shift; with a sublime of terror occupying Britain and a majestic and solemn sublime taking shape in North America. The transformation began with painter Thomas Cole and intensified with Church, Bierstadt and finally Kensett. An early and prominent landscape painter, Thomas Cole (American, b. 1801-1848) painted with the same terrifying grandeur of Turner or Martin. His paintings often inserted classical or allegorical elements into his intimidating landscapes, exhibiting his admiration for these British Romantics (22). Cole’s works, such as *The Course of Empire* (fig. 12) or *Voyage of Life* (fig. 13) series, build off the allegorical landscape style as exhibited by John Martin.

Cole’s intense style though, dissipated after his death in 1848, bringing to the fore, an arguably more simplistic landscape style that rejected allegory, classical elements and adhered to an almost purely topographical approach. Frederic Edwin Church (American b.1828-1900), who painted alongside Cole, developed a style of painting that eschewed the allegorical landscape and focused on the sublimity inherent in the idea that the vision presented was crafted with divine purpose.

Church's piece *Twilight in the Wilderness* (fig. 14), depicts the serenity and majesty of the Maine wilderness. Glowing with crepuscular light, a tranquil lake gives way to gently sloping hills beyond which, a distant mountain range lies, alluding to the vastness of this untouched paradise. In this painting, there are no figures, no pictorial allusions to historical or biblical events or even the suggestion that man exists at all. Rather, it lays before us, in all its glory, the divinity of uncontaminated nature and all it implies.

Albert Bierstadt (American b. 1830-1902), a prominent contemporary to Church, headed instead, for the Western frontier, documenting the majesty of the Rocky Mountains, Yosemite and the Pacific coast. Bierstadt's work espoused the view that Americans were "...the inhabitants, the explorers and according to divine plan, the conquerors of a vast continent" (33). It is not terror in the face of nature, but the invitation to take what is properly owed. Bierstadt's works, more so than Church, strongly convey ideas of manifest destiny, or the divine allotment of North America in all its splendor, to those of European descent. In *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (fig. 15) Bierstadt's shafts of sunlight filtered through clouds appear to point the viewer to the meadow at the base of the mountains. It gives an air of permission, beckoning the traveler to this spot in a gesture of hospitality on the part of a divine presence. Numerous other works by Bierstadt employ this same gestural lighting device, such as *Yosemite Valley* (fig. 16), *Golden Light of California* (fig. 17) and *Estes Park Colorado* (fig. 18). They seem to say, "all of this is yours" rather than "all of this could bite your head off".

The most radical departure from the Burkean sublime is exemplified in the work of painter John Frederick Kensett (American b. 1816-1872). Kensett's work shows an exponentially stripped down style of landscape painting through the rejection of impasto, textured brushwork, and any irregularities, unexpectedness and variety in both his technique and subject matter (25). Through these decisions, his paintings were reduced to a single aesthetic idea; that of topographical study and reflection (25). Kensett unlocks inner reflection through the tranquility and boundlessness of the natural objects he chooses as subject matter. His piece *Eaton's Neck, Long Island* (fig. 19) depicts a gently curving shore fading into a subdued

ocean. Hints of distant shoreline and sailboats give an indication of the great distance between ourselves and the next closest instance of humanity. The curvature of the shore leads the eye into the ocean, taking the viewer from the finite area of the land, to the seemingly infinite expanse of the ocean. This is not the threatening Turnerian leviathan though, these are waters as smooth as glass; it is as if the viewer could walk out on the surface and continue walking forever.

The art of Church, Bierstadt, Kensett and other painters of the American sublime, seem particularly inspired by Kant. There is a distinct emphasis on boundlessness within the work of the aforementioned artists; their work glorifies the unending frontier that is North America, while subduing its terrible aspects. Furthermore, these paintings allude to divine phenomena and the presence of invisible forces through the depiction of nature itself, drawing on the power of latent ideas. Particularly Church's *Twilight* has strong ties to religion and morality. Upon its exhibition it was noted by the *Boston Evening Transcript* that when viewing the painting

“...the imagination whispers that he who was once ‘led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted’, must often at the twilight hour have turned his gaze from the gloom and loneliness of the forest to the brightness and beauty of those heavens...” (130).

The sublimity of Church's piece does not lie within the mountains, or the sunset, but in the viewer's association of this natural imagery with powers far beyond the physical world. “Nature is therefore sublime in those of its phenomena, whose intuition brings with it the Idea of their infinity” (Kant 116).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the art of painters like Bierstadt and Church was perceived as “commercialized vulgarity” that glorified an extinct cultural aesthetic (Wilton et al 63). America was moving towards industrialization and away from the previous fascination with the wilderness that claimed most of the country. Industrialization diminished the power of nature by giving people means to subjugate and tame their domain. The ‘Life in the American Wilderness’ ideal that Church and Bierstadt once exalted, was going extinct at the hands of industrialization, rendering their work defunct.

The fading of the Romantic Era in Britain saw a turning away from the sublime in art, a phenomenon that persisted until the Abstract Expressionists in the 1940's. In particular, the fate of the sublime during the Dadaist movement of Europe (1915-1924) is one of intense subjugation and mockery. The Dadaists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century pulled from Nietzsche's reaction to the sublime of Arthur Schopenhauer, to create the anti-sublime. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (b. 1788-1860)'s sublime is of particular interest in that it examines the relation of humor to the sublime experience, an issue that is not addressed within literature on the sublime until this point. His distinction between the sublimity of humor and the unsophisticated nature of comedy provides the framework around which the Dadaists construct their theories of cultural critique and self-annihilation through art making.

The superiority of the sublime experience was challenged during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having been disparaged by German philosopher and cultural critic Friedrich Nietzsche (b. 1844-1900) in his posthumously-published 1908 novel *Ecce Homo* and mocked by the Dadaist movement (1915-1924). In the essay *Behold the Buffoon: Dada, Nietzsche's Ecce Homo and the Sublime*, Christine Battersby makes the profound connection between Nietzsche's exaltation of the character of the "Hanswurst<sup>8</sup>" in his book *Ecce Homo*, as underlying a Dadaist rejection of the sublime. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche creates the autobiography of a megalomaniacal self, with chapter titles like "Why I Write Such Good Books", but at the same time, Nietzsche is indulging in self-deprecation and self-parody. In one passage he simultaneously touts his spiritedness and names himself the Anti-Christ:

"I fear that even into the highest forms of the dithyramb one will find in me an admixture of that salt which never goes flat...*esprit*...I am the *anti-ass* par excellence and with that a world-historical monster – I am, in Greek and not only in Greek, the *Antichrist*..." (43).

His identification with the Hanswurst, or the buffoon, rails against the sublime as conceived by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Schopenhauer's views on the relation of humor to the sublime are fascinating in

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<sup>8</sup> A character from traditional German comedy which can be understood as a clown or buffoon; someone who mocks both the audience and himself.

their own right, but also create a framework from which Nietzsche and, later, the Dadaists could derive the anti-sublime.

In the essay *On the Theory of the Ludicrous* from his book *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer divides the ludicrous, or that which is ridiculous, into two categories, the humorous (which is ultimately sublime) and the comic (or buffoonery; the Hanswurst is a comic). Schopenhauer's reason for labeling the humorous as sublime, begins with his exploration into the origin of the ludicrous:

“...the origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it...laughter signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity...” (Schopenhauer, 91).

The ludicrous is that which is unexpected and incongruous; that which is *intentionally* ludicrous is the joke (99). A joke is defined by Schopenhauer as “...the effort to bring about a discrepancy between another's concepts and reality by displacing one of the two” (99).

For a joke to be humorous, it must retain an underlying base of seriousness and remain subjective, existing only for the individual. For Schopenhauer, that which is serious is that for which there is a perfect alignment of concept with reality: something without incongruity. Humor is the involuntary meeting between a serious, sublime mood and an external incongruity. Whatever is truly humorous is incongruous only at the surface, but the base is formed by seriousness, or a congruous relationship between reality and concept. The relationship between the reality and concept in humor are incongruous only at the surface. Schopenhauer gives an example of a joke that fits the description of this sublime humor:

“The audience at a theater in Paris once asked for the Marseillaise to be played, and as this was not done, they began shrieking and howling, so that in the end a police commissioner in uniform came on to the stage, and explained that for anything to be done in the theatre other than what appeared on the play-bill was not allowed. A voice then shouted: Et vous, Monsieur, êtes-vous aussi sur l'affiche?<sup>9</sup>” (93)

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<sup>9</sup> “And you sir? Are you on the playbill?”

In this joke, one doesn't question the authority that the police officer has to be on the stage until the heckler points out the discrepancy in the officer's argument. The break between reality and concept thus ensues when we realize that the policeman is violating the exact rule that he is attempting to impose upon the citizens. The policeman decrees that only those who are on the playbill may be permitted on stage, although, he is not on the playbill and yet he takes the stage. The policeman thus painting himself as the textbook definition of a hypocrite and imbecile just by doing what he perceives to be his job.

The joke functions on a deeper and more serious level as well, which corresponds to Schopenhauer's proscription for sublime humor. The joke highlights a critique of law enforcement officials who exempt themselves from the rules they impose on citizens. It is a political comment, made more palatable by humor, which contains at its base a revelation that is both grave and enlightening.

This base of congruity under the humorous contains the sublime experience according to Schopenhauer, thus rendering the humorous, sublime. Therefore, that which is truly humorous is sublime because it challenges the individual's perception of reality. The humorous delivers a sort of "ah-ha" moment in which the audience is forced to reconsider their perspective. This effect could be likened to the Kantian sublime, in which the imagination is stretched to accommodate a new idea, jeopardizing the individual's perception of reality and evoking discomfort in the face of the unfamiliar in the process.

The ideas of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer fuse to influence the anti-sublime of Dadaism. Battersby's essay cleverly makes the connection that, through his glorification of the Hanswurst, Nietzsche underwrote this philosophy of the Dadaists (Battersby). The Hanswurst is a comic; a buffoon that goes against the sublimity of the humorist described in Schopenhauer's sublime. Through their following of Nietzsche, Dadaists such as Hugo Ball (German, b. 1886-1927), George Grosz (German, b. 1893-1959) and Raoul Hausmann (Austrian, b. 1886-1971) subverted the sublime by worshipping the comic; the anti-sublime character.

Dadaism mainly took hold in Zürich, Switzerland; New York City; Berlin, Cologne, and Hannover, Germany; and Paris. The Dadaists were united, not



by a recognizable style, but through a mission of cultural critique and the unveiling of a true reality. As Hugo Ball, a forerunner of the Dadaist movement, expressed: “For us, art is not an end in itself, but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in” (Battersby). In spite of an era that espoused ideas of human superiority, the Dadaists set out to expose the falsehoods inherent in the glorification of the human condition. The character of the Hanswurst, the idiot, is a personification of this aim. The idiot, in his bold misguidedness and full-hearted acceptance of his own triviality, he is able to highlight the triviality of others. In his *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, Dada founder Tristan Tzara (French, b. 1896-1963) proclaims, “Dada is working with all its might towards the universal installation of the idiot. But consciously. And tends itself to become more and more of one” (42). The essential tenets of Dadaism mirror the actions of the comic or idiot, parodying art, culture and the self.

The question of Nietzsche’s influence on the Dadaists is hardly debatable; an example of his influence can be found in Tristan Tzara’s book *Seven Manifestos and Lampisteries*. Tzara was one of the founders of the Dadaist movement and in his book there is a chapter titled “How I Became Charming Likeable and Delightful”. This title chapter is strikingly reminiscent to Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, which contains such boastful chapter titles as “Why I am so Wise” and “Why I am so Clever” along with the aforementioned “Why I Write Such Good Books”. Furthermore, another prominent Dadaist, Hugo Ball, wrote extensively on Nietzsche and referenced Nietzsche often within his own books. (Battersby). Finally, Dada artist George Grosz titled his collection of eighty-four drawings and sixteen watercolors *Ecce Homo*, as a homage to Nietzsche (Battersby). In light of this information there is little question that the influence of Nietzsche on the Dadaists is but a tenuous assertion.

The Dadaists vehemently set themselves against anything that was reminiscent of the academic or bourgeois:

“The Dadaists indulged in iconoclasm, nihilism and subversion of social norms, challenged rationality with irrationality, order with disorder and tradition with a feverish embracing of new ideas, all in reaction to bourgeois society and anything that represented it, especially academic art that favoured outdated Romantic notions” (Barker 29)

Considering that the sublime was a formative concept of the Romantic era, it is no wonder that the Dadaists would embrace philosophies in order to subvert it. In this way, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an era in which the sublime did not hold much power as an aesthetic ideology in Western Europe or America. Dada fizzled out fairly quickly because its power and impact stemmed from its immediacy and its disorganized and contradictory nature. It was a short, but impactful movement that was engulfed by the more subdued Surrealism movement by 1924 (Plumb 28). The sublime would resurface around twenty years later in America with the advent of the Abstract Expressionists.

The sublime regained power in America, during the age of the Abstract Expressionists (1943-1955), particularly in the work of artists who explored the color-field mode of painting. In critic Robert Rosenblum's 1961 article *The Abstract Sublime*, Rosenblum draws parallels between the sublime as described by Burke and Kant and the work of American artists such as Clyfford Still (b. 1904–1980), Barnett Newman (b. 1905-1970), Jackson Pollock (b. 1912-1956) and Mark Rothko (b. 1903-1970). The Abstract Expressionists of this ilk drew from both the Kantian and Burkean conceptions of the sublime to create monumental pieces that overwhelm and absorb the viewer in their vast and unbounded planes of color.

“Indeed, such a breathtaking confrontation with a boundlessness in which we also experience an equally powerful totality is a motif that continually links the painters of the Romantic Sublime with a group of recent American painters who seek out what might be called the “Abstract Sublime”” (Landau 241).

The Abstract Expressionists consciously sought to create a new mode for the sublime through abstract painting that explored expanse and color, rather than form and figure. The writings of both Rothko, and especially Newman, detail an active search for the sublime experience in what is formless. As Irving Sandler states in his compendium of the history of abstract expressionism,

“... the intentions of the color-field painters were visionary; they aimed to create an abstract art suggestive of the sublime, of transcendence, of revelation...To achieve a new art of the sublime, the color-field painters tried to suppress in their art all references to familiar images in nature or in past and present art, since such references would elicit predictable responses.” (Sandler 150)

This group of artists did not merely obtain the descriptor of “sublime” in a passive manner; it was not just applied by a source external to the movement. Barnett Newman, a prominent color field painter known for his “zip” paintings (in which thin lines of color blaze across vast fields of pure pigment), authored a short, but powerful essay titled *The Sublime is Now* in which he calls for the reconfiguration of the sublime in order to free it from a European tradition of failure. Newman decries the Greek obsession with perfection and beauty that has persisted throughout European art and stunted the ability of the sublime to be truly conveyed. Newman claims that past philosophers have all fallen short, somehow, in their assessments of the sublime. Longinus associated the sublime with perfect rhetoric, Kant confused the sublime with the beautiful and Burke’s separation of the sublime and beautiful was “...an unsophisticated and primitive one...” (Landau 137).

According to Newman, there has been a profound struggle in the plastic arts between the sublime and the beautiful. This has confused the philosophy of the sublime and made it beholden to the objective world, where it is slave to the traditional modes of form and figure.

“The failure of European art to achieve the sublime is due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the objective world, whether distorted or pure) and to build art within a framework of pure plasticity (the Greek ideal of beauty...” (138).

He claims that artists of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century have tried to escape this pattern in the sublime, but their work focuses so much on escape, that it fails to realize a new sublime experience (138).

What Newman is ultimately contending within this piece is that the sublime is a purely subjective, emotional experience that should be, must be, freed from a confinement in tandem with objective standards of beauty. Sublime art should function on pure emotion only, and by releasing it from reliance on form and figure, an abstract and timeless sublime is possible.

The art of the Abstract Expressionists, including Newman, had a considerable impact on American and European culture, but eventually succumbed to the very constructs that it was designed to refute and lost its relevance as an art movement. Abstract Expressionism finds its roots in the concept of the avant-garde as

formulated by American essayist and art critic Clement Greenberg (b. 1909-1994). Greenberg sets the stage for Abstract Expressionism in his 1939 essay *The Avant Garde and Kitsch*, which calls for a pursuit of art making that is occupied only with itself, is introverted and refuses to pander to popular aesthetics. Greenberg contends that this can only be achieved through non-objective, or abstract means; it is only through the rejection of the figural that the artist can reach the avant garde, or that which is above society at large. "It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at "abstract" and "nonobjective" art – and poetry too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms...independent of meanings, similar or originals" (Greenberg 36).

Despite its anti-populist stance and preoccupation with itself, Abstract Expressionism gained immense popularity within the US and Europe. Even though it is antagonistic to mass appeal at its very base, magazines such as *Life* and *Vogue*, bastions of popular opinion, wrote various favorable articles on the topic of Abstract Expressionism between 1948 and 1951. Some of the popularity of Abstract Expressionism at least, can be attributed to the fact that it was perceived as one of the first homegrown American art movements. American art critic and historian Irving Sandler (b. 1925), who wrote extensive, first-hand accounts concerning Abstract Expressionism, lauded it as "The Triumph of American Painting", which became the title of his book exploring its development and history. This sense of patriotic pride may have over shadowed the disdain for popular opinion and insular nature of Abstract Expressionist art.

Eventually, this art movement fell victim to the very institutions and ideas that it railed against. One of the most influential art critics of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Hughes (1938-2012), contends that the failing health of Abstract Expressionism was apparent by the end of the 1950s, as it "...was becoming a period style, a national institution and a dealer's gold mine, all at once" (Hughes 318). Hughes goes further, claiming that by 1979, even the "...idea of the avant-garde had gone", swallowed up by the mass aesthetic appeal that it once strived to

escape (365). Abstract Expressionism thus became unhinged and dissipated through its assimilation into the very culture that it professed to rise above.

### SECTION 3: A New Mode for the Sublime

Previous artistic approaches to the sublime are no longer able to deliver the effect they once had. The first section of this paper saw the various manifestations of the sublime and examined its cycles of eclipse and rebirth as it ebbed and flowed through the aesthetic and cultural tastes and philosophies of the era. Presently, there is not much left in the strategy of the Baroque, Romantic or American approach to the sublime that can be transposed into the modern era while retaining its full effect as the experience of being both overwhelmed and exalted. This does not mean that the sublime should be abandoned, as it is the most powerful of human emotions, and continues to captivate the imagination of artists.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest among artists concerning the idea of the sublime. Artists are searching for new ways to evoke the sublime experience, but lack a strong direction. The sublime has lost its sense of direction and purpose, having been diluted by vague references or distillations of the original theories to the point where almost anything can don the moniker of “sublime” without much questioning. In a research publication for the Tate Museum’s study of the sublime, artist Julian Bell argues, “References to it have come from so many angles that it is in danger of losing any coherent meaning” (Bell). There is the so-called “techno-sublime”, the “gothic sublime”, the “suburban sublime” and so forth, all making claims to sublimity without recognizing what it really is. In light of the theoretical framework of the sublime detailed in the first section, I intend to form a cohesive contemporary theory of the sublime experience that employs language and humor to facilitate this end.

According to Jean-François Lyotard, language fulfills all criteria under the Kantian prescriptions and can properly be considered sublime. Furthermore, as has been shown, language is the preferred vehicle of the sublime by both Longinus and

Burke. Schopenhauer's unique take on the connection between humor and the sublime dictates the aim of the text, to utilize humor as a conduit to the sublime. Therefore, it is logical to posit that language and text integrated into painting and other art forms can facilitate the sublime experience.

In an era where the sublime has garnered, renewed interest among artists, it is plausible and arguably necessary, to reexamine the status of the sublime and identify a new aesthetic channel through which it can move. Here I suggest that a fatigued sublime could be remedied through a fusion of text and image, with an emphasis on Schopenhauerian sublime humor as a distinguishing element.

The Romantic, American and baroque modes of landscape and divinity have been emptied of their sublimity. The modern individual is so far removed from the cultural contexts that spurred the creation of these artistic interpretations of the sublime that any attempt to transpose them into the modern era are received as kitsch. Next I will discuss the theories and practices conducive to the execution of a textual sublime in art making will be identified and expounded on. Finally, the textual sublime can be categorized by three main approaches; these three modalities of a new textual sublime and examples of contemporary work that exemplifies each mode will be discussed.

The aesthetics and subject matter of the Baroque, Romantic and American sublime eras have been voided of their sublime potential because of their reliance on the viewer's recognition of underlying ideas of divine power and associations with heaven. It is arguable that this reliance on religion to evoke transcendence, terror or admiration, has lowered such styles to the level of kitsch in the face of a changing cultural climate. In *Kitsch and Art*, Tomas Kulka delves into the nature of kitsch and produces a definition that, when combined with Norman Bryson's concept of the 'Reality' surrounding art and a decline in religious beliefs among younger generations, can be applied to these aesthetic styles.

Kitsch is fundamentally opposed to the sublime because it is "...charged with stock emotions that spontaneously trigger and unreflective emotional response. The subject matter typically depicted by kitsch is generally considered to be beautiful" (Kulka 26). Kitsch does not require any reflection on the part of the viewer, flying in

the face of the Kantian sublime experience, which begins with a reflective judgment; a judgment on the nature of a feeling. Also contrary to Kant, kitsch is extremely superficial and finite, “the associations of the picture should be roughly the same as the “message” of the label [the title]. The associations triggered by kitsch should not abundantly exceed the associations triggered by its label” (37). The kitsch image is described fully by its title; “Fluffy Kitten in Flowers” on canvas is no more than a fluffy kitten among flowers. There is no idea beyond the surface of the image; kitsch lacks the subjective depth of the sublime, sacrificing it for a widespread nostalgia to provide for its popularity with the largest possible group. “Kitsch does not work on individual idiosyncrasies (27).

To further aid kitsch art in its search for pleasantness, kitsch is rarely detached from widely accepted conceptions of Beauty, and the merely beautiful is never to be confused with the sublime, as Newman clarified in *The Sublime is Now*. In line with the Kantian concept of the Beautiful, it is the form of a kitsch object that prompts emotions; a fluffy kitten, a puppy, a sunset on the beach etc. “The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having [definite] boundaries” (Kant 82). In kitsch art, strict limits are imposed by a familiarity of form. The instantaneously recognizable nature of the kitsch object is necessary to instill its strong sentimental or nostalgic emotional effect in the viewer (Kulka 27). Kitsch’s form is its function, and its function is to form a one-size-fits-all, pre-packaged, non-reflective spontaneous emotional moment for the viewer; after which, the object can be discarded.

Since the late nineteenth century, there has been a profound shift in the relationship between religion and society. Religion in the eras of the Baroque, Romantic and American sublime was integrated into almost every facet of life. 20<sup>th</sup> century American has seen a steadily declining emphasis on the importance of religious affiliation and practice with each successive generation. Studies by the Pew Research Center revealed that those individuals of Generation X (b. 1965-1980) and the Millennial Generation (b. 1981-later) who claim to be unaffiliated with any religion are 25% and 32% respectively (Street). This contrasts sharply with the mere 6% of the Silent Generation (b. 1928-1945) who claimed no religious affiliation at the

same point in their lives. Among Millennials who do hold religious views, participation is down, with only 18% reporting that they attend religious services “nearly every week”. Compare this to the 37% of Silent Generation and 44% of Greatest Generation (b. 1928 or earlier) who reported attending services nearly every week when they were between 18 and 30 years of age (Street). This trend in declining affiliation and religious apathy is intensifying to degrees never before recorded, and certainly unheard of in the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (Street).

Why should this have any effect on the longevity of the sublime in the Baroque or Romantic style? The reduced importance of religion, culturally, as expressed through empirical studies of religious affiliation among successive generations, reduces the effect of these once-sublime styles to kitsch by rendering their underlying religious appeals silent. Latent references to the limitlessness and power of the divine, which would have been recognized by the average viewer, are no longer accessible in the face of a cultural shift away from a lifestyle that is heavily saturated by religion. This does not necessarily contend that the original artwork by artists like Pozzo, Martin or Bierstadt lose their sublimity, but that contemporary artwork that transposes their style and subject matter (the chorus of angels, the allegorical landscapes etc.) into the present, lack the depth required for the sublime; it is kitsch.

This phenomenon of failed transposition follows from the condition that this artwork is created outside of the bubble, which embraced certain religious and cultural views, validating the underlying ideas concerning divinity that evoked the sublime experience and made it ‘Real’. ‘Realism’, according to art theorist Norman Bryson,

“...lies rather in the effect of recognition of a representation as corresponding to what a particular society proposes and assumes as ‘Reality’. The real needs to be understood not as a transcendent and changeless given, but as a production brought about by human activity within specific cultural constraints” (Bryson 8).

The religious intensity required to facilitate the sublime experience of these artistic periods comes from the collective reality of the time that espoused the idea that God



was real and present in everything. This belief system was created to help individuals deal with their own powerlessness in a time before science was mature enough to provide definitive answers for the great questions and tragedies in life. The concept of God provided rationality and structure to explain the events of an otherwise random existence. In representing all that exists, God necessarily encompassed all that was beautiful along with all that was terrible in nature, inspiring conflicting feelings of terror and admiration.

The cultural restraints placed by the decline of religion in the recent century makes the sublime aesthetics of the aforementioned eras ‘unreal’ through the rapidly waning ability of the population to be moved by the ideas behind the aesthetic. It reduces the ideas to form, and sublimity to beauty, when aesthetics such as sublime landscape or transcendental ceiling paintings are attempted in the contemporary era. These modes of reaching the sublime, when employed today, yield a spurious imitation of a genuine artistic creation which “...does not substantially enrich our associations related to the depicted subject” (Kulka 37). The cultural gap between now and the era of the formulation of these styles, creates a void in understanding, where the viewer is reminded of great art, but lacks the mindset of a bygone era to experience a contemporary transposition with the same reverence and effect.

Lack of a strong religious connection among those in recent generations reduces the grand idea of admiration, divinity and the power of God, that so moved viewers of the past, to null, replacing them with a desire for form and beauty. The modern viewer understands only the image in front of them, and not the underlying web of associations that were once inimical to the sublime. They focus on the attractiveness of form and display of technical skill, which are two attributes of the beautiful.

A fantastic example of this degradation of sublimity to kitsch through a failed transposition of aesthetics, is in the comparison of American sublime landscapist Thomas Coles’s painting *The Hunter’s Return* (fig. 20) to “painter of light” and kitsch king Thomas Kinkade’s (American, b. 1958-2012) piece *Away From it All* (fig. 21). Both pieces depict a river, a cabin and a mountain looming in the distance. They are

almost identical in aesthetic and subject matter, yet one is painted by an artist known for their influence on the American sublime, while the other is known as the “king of kitsch”, but why should this distinction matter? It is because Cole operates in the Reality of the sublime experience; *The Hunter's Return* was created when living anywhere too far from the East coast was truly living out in a wild, unfamiliar territory under the protection of unforeseen powers that you prayed would remain benevolent, and not turn the terrors of nature against you.

Kinkadee's cabin, on the other hand, is only pretending to embrace the wilderness. Produced in a time with electricity, running water, cars, etc. his references to the wilderness read merely as “the great outdoors”, a phrase which implies that there will always be an “indoors”, where one can sit and watch TV while microwaving a pizza. What *Away From it All* knows about the wilderness is gleaned from the depictions of the wilderness as produced by artists like Cole and Bierstadt. *Log Cabin Retreat* can do no more than remind us of Cole, but cannot move us like Cole because *Away From it All* lacks a cultural-historical background that perpetuates a sublime potentiality. Kinkadee's piece only spurs pleasant, warm and fuzzy feelings through its use of lighting, expert technique and familiar subject matter, then prompts one to go look for Cole's or Martin's or Pozzo's work, because that's where the sublime aesthetic of the power of nature and the divine truly and forever resides.

Past modes of the sublime are therefore rendered as kitsch when transposed into a contemporary artistic practice. The sublime as the majesty of mountains or the power of the Church is off limits to the modern artist pursuing the sublime. So we move on. The Abstract Expressionists have introduced the concept of formlessness to sublime art and proclaimed “The familiar identity of things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment” (Landau 141). Rothko's statement will be the point at which we leave the known sublime, in its impotence and forge ahead into new territory.

Language is sublime. Text has sublime potential. This has come up over and over again in the various theoretical renditions of the sublime that have been

examined. Burke spoke of the sublimity in language, as well as Longinus. Kant never directly mentions the sublimity of language, but Jean François Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* reasoned, through Kant's tenet of the infinite as inimical to the sublime, that language conveyed sublimity. The logic hinges on the limitlessness inherent in language, the "horizon of meaning" that lies beyond the mere dictionary definition of any word. This horizon subsumes any word, imparting to it, infinite access to aesthetic Ideas and giving language an unparalleled subjective depth.

"...an aesthetic Idea...gives thought an "incentive to spread its wings over" ...a host of representations that "provoke more thought than admits of expression in a concept determined by words" ...No language determinant of its object can remain afloat before the tide of aesthetic Ideas. The tide carries away the words of concepts...[words of definition]...are lost in a "field of kindred representations...stretching beyond its ken...we are reminded here of Burke, who argued that the words themselves have...a limitlessness" (Lyotard 66).

This "limitlessness" engendered by language through its capacity for association makes it infinite, or near infinite in nature. The "...aesthetic comprehension of the whole (at one time) of a very large or infinite series is what reason demands of imagination and what provokes the sublime emotion" within the description of the Kantian sublime (Lyotard 109). When confronted with words or with language, there are many meanings inherent in the syllables, which arise from numerous sources. A word has a dictionary definition, it has multiple modes of use, it can carry slang connotations, it may evoke memories or sensory experiences or it may impart a visual impact that draws on pictorial associations formed by the shape of the letters themselves. As pseudo-conceptual, pseudo-concrete entities, words are used to describe the objective and definite as well as the subjective and abstract. Both a report on the amount of oil in Canada and the emotional speech of someone accepting an award are presented through language. Many arguments have been made to the effect that both thought and experience are constructed by language. It can be argued that experiences alter, however nominally, the way we think and consequently, our relationship with words. This collection of unique experiences held by each individual builds up a unique personal vocabulary that prompts

linguistic associations that influence how someone conceptualizes words, extracts meaning from language or what thoughts and sensations are evoked. It is this recognition of the link between language and limitlessness that sets the groundwork for a text-centric sublime.

Schopenhauer's emphasis on humor is the distinguishing feature within this formula. The use of humor to pursue the sublime is itself humorous under the rules of Schopenhauer due to the longstanding history of seriousness that has generally accompanied the expressions of the sublime. Schopenhauer's unique stance on humor as a component of the sublime has been generally overlooked throughout the pursuit of the sublime in art. Its only reference has been in regards to the anti-sublime. The idea, though, is fairly revolutionary, turning upside down the traditional idea of sublime rhetoric as conceived by Longinus or Burke. They both limited themselves to the dour and weighty use of language as exemplified by literature such as *The Odyssey* and *Paradise Lost*. This trend applies to the sublime in art as well; the sublime has existed in art under an air of seriousness. The idea of humor appears contradictory to the evocation of the sublime based on the traditional conception of it as evidenced in art history. This is exactly what allows the pursuit of the sublime through humor to function as humorous in its own right.

The Schopenhauerian concept of sublime humor is paradoxical in nature, being composed of two incongruities. Underlying the incongruities though, is a "sublime seriousness" that reveals some fundamental truth or challenges the validity of an individual's beliefs. Since current conception of the sublime is largely that of a spectacle, or some sort of transcendent experience, meeting the anticipation of the viewer with humor challenges their concept of the sublime. By thwarting their expectation of seriousness, a humorous sublime stitches together incongruous ideas to form a whole that is both funny and expands the viewer's perception of what can be sublime. Therefore, the pursuit of the sublime through humor, functions as sublime humor in its own right.

Of course, this larger argument for humor rests on the construction of artworks that are themselves, humorous. This is the aim of my own body of work. I intend to create works that employ text in a way that is both humorous, but also

challenges how the viewer perceives the world. Lyotard's assertion of the sublime nature of language aids in this goal by providing a highly subjective framework for linguistic associations that corresponds to the Schopenhauerian requirement that sublime humor remain subjective. If the artwork fails to fulfill the criteria for Schopenhauerian humor, then it fails to evoke the sublime and the concept as a whole falls through. There are strategies to be followed in the pursuit of a textual sublime to ensure its effectiveness and maximum possibility for humor.

First, there are two necessary aspects that must be present within the work, brevity or ambiguity in text and the construction of revealing incongruities. Revealing incongruities are jokes that expose a personal belief to the viewer by challenging their expectations. These incongruities do not necessarily have to exist solely within the text, they can be found in the relation of the text to the rest of the piece, in the nature materials used compared to purpose of the piece or in relation of the format used and the information divulged. The utilization of these two aspects ensures that both Schopenhauerian humor and Lyotard's linguistic sublimity through infinite association are present within the work.

Secondly, there have been various contemporary artists that have integrated text into art making in styles that are conducive to the sublime through their treatment of text and relation of text and image. In examining their work, three approaches to tackling the sublime through language and humor can be identified. These categories describe the physical construction of the pieces, or the mode in which the artist's idea is expressed; but it does not necessarily depend on the artist's explanations of the aim of their work. The three modalities can be called the "symbiotic", "subversive" and "monolithic" and encompass both brevity and incongruities within their proper expression. Work that does not contain these two tenets is not fit to be categorized under one of the modalities of a textual sublime.

Sparseness or simplicity of text is inimical to the success of the textual sublime. This stems from both the Longinian admiration of brevity and a Lacanian phenomenon called the "sliding of the signified". French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (wrote extensively on the nature of discourse throughout his work in psychoanalysis and details the sliding of the signified in his essay *The*

*Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious* (1957). This phenomenon describes the ability of words to link together to narrow the gap of ambiguity between parties engaging in verbal communication. "...Lacan repeatedly emphasizes the multiple meanings in discourse: the fact that it is virtually impossible to say anything that is devoid of all ambiguity and does not play off all the resonances that individual words have in the language one employs and in one's cultural environment" (Fink 88). Lacan asserts that not all words in a sentence correspond with a related thought, but there are certain points, or "button ties" as he calls them, where the ambiguity of the words is diminished. It is through the proliferation of these button ties that a sentence can be understood under a narrow and easily comprehensible sense; both parties are able to discern the true meaning of what is being communicated. Button ties correspond to the length of a sentence "in other words, the latter part of a sentence *puts a stop to the sliding of meaning*...that sliding being equivalent here to the listener's uncertainty as to which number of possible meanings should be preferred" (90).

Therefore, keeping a sentence free of "button ties", or taking measures to protect against its consolidation and narrowing of meaning, allows a greater degree of ambiguity and retains the limitlessness described by Lyotard. To add button ties is to give a sentence a truer form through a far more concrete meaning. This form precludes limitlessness by asserting bounds, reducing the potential for a broad horizon of association. Richard Prince's *Jokes* series encounters this problem of verbosity. The pieces in this series are predominantly large-scale canvases painted either a solid color or a white wash over a muted pastel color field, on top of which are stenciled very dry or dark-humored jokes. For example, (fig. 22) states "I asked my wife what she wanted for her birthday. When she said she wanted a divorce, I told her I wasn't planning in spending that much money." There is no ambiguity within the text, it is clear what the joke it is, and the viewer can quickly move on. By clearly displaying the joke, by presenting a complete thought, Prince has claimed the joke for himself, leaving almost nothing for the viewer to inject with subjectivity. Prince is dictating the joke rather than the audience creating a joke from the material presented by the artist that suits their sense of humor.

While Prince's jokes may be restricted in their capacity for humor when the text is examined on its own, the relationship between the color field painting and the text forms an example of a reveling incongruity. The audience approaches the painting, expecting a pristine color field reminiscent of Rothko, or Newman, only to be assaulted by a joke that completely disrupts the viewing experience. In thwarting the expectations of the viewer and challenging their idea of what a color field painting can be, Prince's *Jokes* series employs a revealing incongruity. It exposes the limitations that the viewer has set on their definition of a color-field painting. By refusing to live up to the quasi-religious emotional experience that was the aim of Newman, Prince's interpretation of a field painting challenges the viewer to accept a broader perspective. It prompts the question of whether or not it can be rightfully associated with the work of Newman, despite its irreverent nature. It calls into question even deeper ideas of what constitutes fine art by elevating a crass and base level of humor by associating it with the avant garde. By revealing these serious questions about what constitutes high art through the revealing incongruity of the irreverent joke on the pristine color field, Prince's work invokes Schopenhauer's concept of sublime humor.

There are three modalities I have ascribed, through which text and humor co-exist to function as sublime art. These are the symbiotic, the subversive and the materialistic. In the symbiotic use of text or language within painting, the image and text play off each other in an incongruous manner as to widen the field of possible association. An example of an artist who has employed the symbiotic modality is John Baldessari. The subversive mode involves the subordination of form to an authoritative rendering of text that diminishes the sublime potential of the pictorial image while heightening its own. Artists representing this group include Ed Ruscha and Richard Prince. The final category, the materialistic, describes the use of language in regards to certain materials to create an incongruity between text and substrate. The work of Kay Rosen falls into this category. Unconventional combinations of humorous text and material illustrate the relationship between our expectations regarding the purpose of these materials. Each mode will be examined in regards to the artwork that exemplifies it to better illustrate the meaning behind each moniker.

The symbiotic nature utilizes a narrative structure created by pictorial-textual incongruities to unlock a myriad of associations and to reveal something about the viewer's personal beliefs to them; this is often accomplished through humor. American painter John Baldessari's (b. 1931) *Goya* series, which consists of black and white photographs of singular objects paired with sparse text, is one of the most astute examples of the symbiotic Textual sublime. The pieces *Other People* and *Tip for Artists* contain their humor in the relationship between the text and image. *Other People* (fig. 23) is simply a photo of a ball of tangled twine laying on the floor with the phrase "Other People" written underneath. Unlike the sublime of aforementioned eras, *Other People* does not strike the viewer immediately; rather, it is more of an "ah-ha" moment. After pondering it for a few moments, the ball of string begins to acquire associations that are aided in their breadth by the ambiguity of the text. Subjective results are the only ones possible due to the highly associative nature of the incongruous text and image. For example, the tangled string could represent the complicated nature of other people and how it is best to just let them be. Or it the artist could be blaming other people for leaving string on his floor, the text of "other people" acting as an exasperated and passive aggressive statement.

*Tip for Artists* (fig. 24) runs in a similar vein as *Other People* exhibiting a knife, underwritten by the title phrase. Again, the relation is not obvious and it is not fundamentally tenuous, but depends on the audience's effort to construct a conceptual bridge between text and image. It also calls on an individual's prior knowledge and experiences, leading to varying interpretations. Perhaps what Baldessari is alluding to is the tendency of artists to engage in radical and often self-destructive actions. It could be suggesting a new tool with which to lay paint on a canvas or otherwise go about art making. It may be about cutting ties with those who can negatively influence or stifle the creative process. Baldessari's images, rather than being limited by the text, are expanded by it, the text functions as a multiplier of associations rather than a restrictor of meaning.

Of course this is all subjective. The nature of a joke, according to Schopenhauer is inherently subjective. What one person thinks is funny, may not be funny to another. The interpretations I have assigned to Baldessari's work are my own, they are not inherent in the artwork, and they come from the amalgamation of the image and text subsumed under



the umbrella of my own individual experiences and knowledge. These interpretations would not be the same for everyone. The influence that individual experience has on the formation of associations concerning the text-image object serves to widen the field of possible meanings and interpretations the object can appropriate. Brevity of text, like the vague phrases that Baldessari employs, further widen this field by abstaining from narrow interpretation. This combination of ambiguous text with incongruous image work together to form a narrative functioning as sublime in its revealing of buried truths within the audience. Both elements are required in the symbiotic sublime in order for it to function; the image informs the text just as the text informs the image. The addition of the text adds a second layer to the piece that elevates it to a greater plane of meaning. Without the text, works like Baldessari's *Goya* series would seem like an inventory of object.

The thought Baldessari presents is both complete and incomplete. It is complete in that the text and image are necessarily present, but incomplete in that the message relies on the viewer's synthesis of it. The audience is left to write in this conclusion based on their own interpretations. Their choice of conclusion creates a revelation under the guise of nonsensical text-image negotiation, wherein they create a bridge to overcome the incongruity using familiar associations that in turn, reveal an important truth about their personal beliefs concerning concrete or abstract material dredged up in the process of the reflective judgment. The text and image relation is constructed to create a tension between the nonsensical nature it initially appears to have and a seriousness and truth that underlies the associations.

The artwork of Ed Ruscha (b. 1937), an American painter and contemporary of Baldessari, is representative of the subversive modality where text exerts authority over image as a purveyor of the sublime. Ruscha's work has predominantly explored text as it relates to popular and consumer culture, achieving his initial success in the world of pop art with pieces like *Standard Station* (fig. 25) and *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (fig. 26). With the advent of his "Grand Horizontal" works in the late 1970's, Ruscha began to reference sublime landscape painting of artists like Church and Bierstadt, but subordinated them to an incongruous and authoritative text. Text and image do not

function side-by-side in Ruscha's work as they do in Baldessari's, but act as authoritative and dominant elements. Ruscha describes the phenomenon himself:

"A lot of my paintings are anonymous backdrops for the drama of words...And the backgrounds are of no particular character. They're just meant to support the drama, like the Hollywood sign being held up by sticks" (Richards 79).

The pieces *Who Am I* (fig. 27) and *Oranges, Peaches, Pears, Apples, Grapes, You Name it* (fig. 28), contain the sunset in its brilliant color and elude to mountains and the expanse of the earth, but the words are the true drama. Particularly *Who Am I*, with its striking contrast created by the smallness of the text compared to the vastness of both the canvas and the gravity of the question "who am I"? This statement trivializes the background with questions of existence and identity, prompting readers to think only of themselves, rather than ponder the mysteries and ideas provoked by nature. This shows a vast departure from the purpose of landscape in the paintings of the Romantic era.

Ruscha goes a step further in his Mountain-Range series, which he began in the late 1990's. This series contains photo realist images of mountain peaks set against unnaturally blue skies. Demanding the audience's attention is not the mountains, but rather, the formidable block letters of the classic Ruscha "Boy Scout Utility Modern" font, with its clipped corners and dense neutrality dominating the center of the image. These images explode the idea of the sublime painting by downplaying the classically sublime imagery of the mountain and demanding the viewer to focus on the words. Since the text has nothing to do with the mountains, the audience is removed from the painting and prompted to think about what is described by the text, rather than ponder the image in from of them. His piece *Molten Polyester* (fig. 29) absorbs the viewer with an enormous mirror-imaged mountain scape, only to extract them from the experience with the text MOLTEN POLYESTER, which is emblazoned across the center of the image. This functions to seed the viewer's mind with the image of melting plastic fabrics, or other imagery, thus subverting the grand peak to the idea of burning plastics.

The question arises as to what the real work of art is; the painting in from of the viewer, or the image, prompted by the text, that takes form in the mind of the audience. This construct contains a sublime element because it challenges the nature of a painting; it makes the viewer question their concept of a painting as a strictly physical object. How

could this painting function as a visual work of art, when its text describes a mental image, which proceeds to overtake the painting itself?

American artist Kay Rosen (b. 1949) creates formidable artworks that utilize stand-alone text and humor in combination with unexpected mediums to play off the audience's perception of certain materials. The use of highway billboards coupled with her witticisms, questions the function of a billboard by combining it with a humorous and enlightening message. The projection of a fine art object onto the billboard further confuses its purpose as an advertising medium by imbuing it with something that is more valuable than a product intended for mass consumption (the usual specialty of billboards). This approach to the sublime elevates an everyday object through the use of immediately humorous text and a revealing incongruity created by coupling nonsensical text with certain substrates.

Rosen's use of unconventional materials or presentation utilizes Schopenhauerian humor by creating a revealing incongruity between the expectations of the viewer and the reality that is given. By presenting her work in the form of a billboard, Rosen toys with the viewer's expectation of what information is usually presented in such a format. Her billboard titled *Hi* (fig. 30) is a highway billboard with the witticism written across it in bold block letters. The "H" and the "I" in the sequence of letters are colored yellow, revealing the word "HI" within an alphabetical sequence of letters. Since the format of the billboard is predominantly used for advertising or drawing attention to a cause, this innocent message seems out of place in relation to the substrate. Rosen is elevating the billboard to the level of a fine art object, which seems alien in an era where billboards seem to function only as visual pollution that line the sides of America's highways. *Hi* challenges the expectation of a highway billboard by combining text with unconventional substrates to catch the viewer off guard and prompt them to reconsider the nature of the billboard. It transforms a common object into something more unfamiliar by combining it with an unexpected element, the word play of "ABCDEFGH**HI**", which doesn't seek to sell anything, only to greet you. It reveals the deeply entrenched conceptions we have about the purpose of a billboard through our surprise at seeing such a message imprinted on one.

In addition to her combination of text and material, Rosen uses witticisms that function as sublime in their contortion of language. Rosen explores linguistic play in brief, but bold outbursts that inject her text directly with humor, rather than relying on a relationship with an image to deliver the full effect. Rosen's choice of text functions as the Schopenhauerian "ah-ha" moment found in sublime humor. The audience is vexed and confused at first in trying to grasp the meaning behind the contortion of language, but upon deciphering the joke, the audience is rewarded with laughter and new knowledge on the nature of linguistics. For example, the piece *John Wilkes Booth* (fig. 31) initially appears absurd, but further inspection reveals the true message of the piece. "Ass ass in in the the ater" it put together to form the correct phrase "Assassin in the theater"; which has far more serious implications than the initial, nonsensical, message. The gravity discovered upon deciphering the message can be construed as a seriousness underlying something humorous; lending further Schopenhauerian sublime attributes to the piece.

#### SECTION 4: My Execution of Theory

My own artwork employs all of the three modalities, the subversive, the symbiotic and the materialistic. It draws on the infinite nature of language as identified by Lyotard, to coax the sublime experience within the viewer through the conduit of humor. By combining the sublime nature of language with the Schopenhauerian formulations of sublime humor, which are rooted in incongruities, I intend to thwart the viewer's expectations and invite them to embrace an elevated mode of thinking. My exhibition is an affront to the traditional concept of the sublime as a serious and weighty idea. My project is meant to challenge the viewer's perception of the sublime and provide the theoretical framework to back it up. By combining text and image in strange and humorous ways, I wish to provoke the viewer to make unconventional connections, to overwhelm them with possibilities and challenge their expectations.

The work I am presenting in tandem with this paper consists of painting, silkscreen prints and sculpture. Each medium corresponds with one of the three modalities of the sublime that I have identified. Through these works I seek to create revealing incongruities to challenge the audience's previously held beliefs concerning the nature of painting, their concept of fine art materials, the perceived legitimacy of certain

formats and the popularly held conception of the “sublime” as an artistic concept. By employing both the sublimity of language and humor, I wish to create a sublime experience that simultaneously overwhelms, delights and enlightens the viewer.

My collection of works is split into three mediums (painting, silkscreen and sculpture) that correspond with the three modalities that I have identified (subversive, symbiotic and materialistic). The paintings pursue the subversive modality of the sublime through diminishing of the importance of the painting itself and simultaneously elevating the importance of the text. These paintings seek to utilize the infinite nature of language to create a revealing incongruity that challenges the viewer’s expectation of what constitutes a sublime painting. Similar to the *Mountains* series by Ruscha, where the text overtakes the image and demands the audience to focus on the image described by the text rather than the physical painting before them.

Secondly, the materialistic mode of the sublime is explored through sculptural pieces that, again, play with the audience’s attitudes towards materials by coupling them with unexpected text. Drawing on formats and materials that have strong associations, such as celebratory banners, felt and chenille craft pompoms, I aim to create pieces that elevate the common to the realm of the sublime by combining it with text and employing it in an unconventional and glorified manner.

Finally, the collection of silkscreen prints corresponds to the symbiotic sublime by allying text with image to create a narrative that exposes how we receive information presented in certain formats. These silkscreen prints accomplish this goal by exploring the dichotomy of a legitimate format coupled with nonsensical information. By legitimate format, I mean formats that are widely perceived to be informative or have been created to convey valuable information to an audience; such as a graph or diagram. Pairing a legitimate format with nonsensical text functions as a revealing incongruity by exposing the audience’s attitudes towards information that is presented in a specific format: particularly that we are more likely to view the information presented in this way as bearing some kind of truth or fact. The joke is that the information presented means nothing, but the format it is presented in causes the viewer, at first glance, to assume that the info-graphic contains some amount of useful information.

The paintings within my body of work pursue the subversive sublime mode, where the text diminishes the traditional sublimity of the image while simultaneously elevating itself. I have taken fragments of images and collaged them with abstract and painterly marks to further dilute the power or importance of that which is recognizable or figural (fig. 32). It is a step beyond the style seen in Ruscha's mountain paintings, but does not go as far as Newman's color fields. The images in my paintings are only partly discernable, like fragments of a dream, dictated by phrases that create a strange and unfamiliar relationship. With the text being the only "whole" element in the pieces, the only element that is not truncated or cut up, it is the most reliable element that viewer can turn to for an explanation as to what is happening or being conveyed. Therefore, the text takes on an air of authority and dominion over the image. My goal through these paintings is to provoke a sublime experience by utilizing humorous text that undermines the painting itself and creates a tension between the physical images presented and the mental image evoked by the text in order to illustrate the idea of the sublime painting as being the "anti-painting".

These works challenge the audience's concept of a painting by de-emphasizing the image. It is an approach similar to Richard Prince's subversion of color field painting to inappropriate jokes and Ruscha's subduing of mountain peaks to bold text. The viewing experience of my paintings is interrupted by an incongruous line of text, which pulls the attention away from the figural elements through its own comparative absurdity. As Ruscha expressed earlier, the text turns the rest of the painting into a backdrop. The audience, being absorbed more so by the text, than the image, may experience the wealth of associations that accompany language as understood by Lyotard. This wealth of associations triggers a flurry of activity within the viewer as they experience sensations catalyzed by the text and construct a mental image around the concepts extrapolated from the words. These ideas, or mental images, create a tension within the viewer in regards to the relationship between the physical painting and the mental activity that it provokes.

This phenomenon brings with it the question of the importance of the painting as a physical object. Does the sublime painting function successfully in its physical form, or does it function by setting the imagination to the task of creating its own image? The text prompts the mind to focus on imagining what is being described, while the images plead

it to stay through their immediacy and familiarity. This push-pull dynamic is reminiscent of Kant's description of the sublime as a force that alternately attracts and repels. The text seeds the mind and tempts it to turn inward so to coax the seed to blossom into a mental image, while externally, the physical depictions on the canvas attempt to hold the viewer fast.

This tension between perceived and imagined image, catalyzed by the text-dominated relationship, calls into question the concept or nature of a painting that pursues the sublime. Rather than existing as something to enjoy in its physicality, a subversive textually sublime painting elevates the mental image over the physical object by confronting the audience with authoritative text. The line between the perception of the painting and the construction of a mental image blur as the audience wrestles with the painting as both a collection of visual stimuli and prompted mental images. It becomes hard to say whether the text itself is humorous, or whether the mental image constructed is truly humorous. Is the audience enjoying painting because of its physical form, or because of the associations caused by the text-image relationship and how they manifest themselves mentally? As the physicality of the painting breaks down in the face of the active imagination the nature of the painting is questioned.

If the painting serves to evoke the sublime experience, but the object itself does not embody the sublime experience, as explained by Longinus, Burke and Kant, how can the painting itself exist in an exhibition about the sublime, when the sublime cannot be found in the physical form of any object? Painting in pursuit of the sublime necessarily requires the creation of a work that does not function in its physicality. In order to paint the sublime, one must paint for the invisible, for the benefit of a storm of mental activity within the mind of the audience. It is almost as if a sublime painting is not a painting at all, the painting breaks down into a feeling wherein the physical nature of the painting no longer matters. In this way, the paintings create a grand Schopenhauerian incongruity, where the physicality of the painting is juxtaposed with its goal of creating a sublime experience.

The material modality is explored through the sculptural pieces that include the banner and the field of pom-poms. Utilizing humorous text, craft materials and a fine-arts environment, I intend to elevate common craft materials so to challenge the audience's

perception of them. They function as sublime in that they take what is familiar and make it unfamiliar and new, elevating it, just as Rembrandt elevated common individuals to the level of the sublime through his renderings of their image. The combination of bizarre and humorous messages to challenge the perception of the format and materials functions as sublime because it is laughable, but it causes the audience to rethink the nature of the material and format used, invoking the Schopenhauerian revealing incongruity so inimical to the humorous sublime.

In a banner piece similar to the study shown in figure 33, the format of a collection of individual letters strung up on a string resembles the traditional form of a celebratory banner and imbues the audience with the expectation of a specific message; that of celebration. By altering the banner to convey a message that is unexpected in relation to its format, it functions as a joke. By virtue of its construction and shape, it lends to a certain popular perception of its use, but in its message it shatters that perception and becomes something unfamiliar and new. The object is no longer a “celebratory banner”, even though it looks like one. The audience is then left to contend with what they are facing; an object that is both familiar and at the same time unfamiliar. The absurdity of the text is amplified by the format, in that the familiarity of the form only serves to make the absurd text seem more alien. It is like a talking dog; the form of the dog is familiar, but its action of talking is not. The audience is both attracted and repulsed by the oscillating familiar-unfamiliar dichotomy, creating an effect similar to Kant’s description of the sublime experience as detailed earlier. Furthermore, the incongruity between message and physical format is sublime in the Schopenhauerian sense by destabilizing the audience’s perception of the celebratory banner format.

The incongruous nature of the sculptural pieces is further deepened by the use of particular materials that have strong ties to children’s arts and crafts, but are not readily associated with fine art, let alone the sublime. Felt, yarn and chenille pompoms, are not traditionally associated with a gallery setting. Employing these materials takes something that is familiar and asks the audience to re-contextualize it in a new setting, thus slightly warping its commonly perceived nature. It places the pom-poms and felt in a context that creates the perception of an intellectual object that can be imbued with meaning, such as the paintings of Church or Bierstadt used depictions of nature to recall the divine. The



practice of using craft materials recalls descriptions of sublimity in art as penned by Jonathan Richardson, who praised the elevation of the common and everyday as the true way to pursue the sublime. Asking the audience to accept pompoms as sublime art objects is absurd in its own right and necessarily prompts the viewer to question their definition of what materials can be used in the creation of fine art. The pompoms highlight the narrow definition of what the population, as a whole, perceives as materials conducive to art making. Claiming such mundane materials, materials that are commonly associated with children's kindergarten craft projects, as sublime, exposes commonly held conceptions about "proper" art making mediums.

My screen-prints function through the symbiotic modality by combining image and text that work in tandem to form a narrative that is humorous but also exposes commonly held conceptions pertaining to the relationship between image format and text. The screen prints function as symbolically sublime rather than materialistically sublime, despite their similar play on format, because they contain both image and text, as opposed to just text. Furthermore they cease to function at all if either element is removed. The image, without the qualifying text, fails to attain absurdity, while the text, without the image, loses its false sense of legitimacy through the inability to attain the disguise of a complete, informational image.

The image half of the screen-prints predominantly utilizes formats that are associated with information dissemination, such as graphs, Venn diagrams and posters. These images are composed in a manner that evokes informative constructs, but subtle absurdities in their form coupled with the nature of the accompanying text, creates a narrative far removed from what is expected (fig. 34). Their initial form implies that there is an underlying reality to the image, that scientific study was conducted to further help us understand how some portion of our world works. The text revokes this underlying reality and throws the image into unfamiliar territory as it warps the informational format into a new and antithetical shape. As the audience realizes that the graphs and posters do not stand for physical happenings, an alternate reality is suggested by this text-image combination, which gels with the Burkean assertion that language is sublime by representing that "...which can seldom occur in the reality..." (Burke 173). This text-image combination creates uncertainty within the audience, as they struggle to

contextualize the new reality presented and determine whether the information presented is trustworthy based solely on its format.

The graphs play with the general attitude of trust towards “scientifically” presented facts and figures. Studies have shown that individuals are more likely to find a publication “intelligent” or “trustworthy” if mathematical equations or graphics are inserted throughout. By presenting an image that draws the viewer in with the expectation of informing them of something, only to deny this expectation by delivering them nonsense, I am creating an incongruity between format and content. The result is a humorous piece that appears to espouse something factual about the world we live in, but in reality, fails to deliver. There is humor inherent in both the literal words of the text and the relation of the text to the format. Just as was seen in my treatment of the materialistic textual sublime, the symbiotic sublime uses this juxtaposition to heighten the absurdity of the text and, consequently, the image as a whole. The result is sublime humor in the Schopenhauerian sense; where the expectations of the viewer are challenged through humor to reveal their overly trusting attitude towards an informational format.

In sum, the textual sublime is initiated by the touting of language as the preferred vehicle of the sublime throughout its descriptions as told by Pseudo-Longinus and Edmund Burke. It is further catalyzed by idea of “formlessness” as being inimical to the sublime as detailed by Kant and Newman. This appraisal of formlessness leads to Lyotard’s recognition of language’s sublimity through its infinite nature, creating a wide field of unique associations available to each word and differing from viewer to viewer. This maximizes the subjectivity that is necessary for Schopenhauerian sublime humor, making humor the preferred expression of a textual sublime. The textual sublime is reached through the use of revealing incongruities and ambiguity within text as channeled through the subversive, symbiotic or materialistic mode of image making. If the execution of the ideas I’ve laid out is successful, then there will be some semblance of these explanations within my body of work. I should hope that my pieces come across as humorous, as I have tried to employ, in their construction, all the strategies that I created.

Through this paper we have seen the transformation of the sublime, as both a visual and theoretical phenomenon. The concept of the sublime has ebbed and flowed with art movements since the rediscovery of *Peri Hypsous* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It

experienced eras of great popularity and influence, and some eras of disparagement. The powerful emotions that compose the sublime experience seem to alternately attract and repel artists, just as the sublime experience in the individual functions in the same way. With renewed interest in the sublime once again cropping up among contemporary artists, it seems necessary to rethink the sublime in this new context and formulate a conception that has stable roots in old tradition and theory but reaches its branches up into the new and unknown. This is why I propose a textual sublime that is based on the infinite nature of language, which allows incongruities of word and image to function as both humorous and unfamiliar, provoking a response that is sublime in its ability to enlighten.





fig. 1  
*Allegory of the Missionary Work of the Jesuits*

Andrea Pozzo

1691-94

San Ignazio Church, Rome





fig. 2  
*Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power*  
Pietro da Cortona  
1633-39  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Italy





fig. 3

*Johannes Wtenbogaert*

Rembrandt Van Rijn

1633

Currently at the Rijksmuseum, Netherlands



fig. 4

*St. Catherine of Alexandria*

Raphael

1507

Currently at the National Gallery, London





*Left*  
*fig. 5*  
*The Shipwreck*  
 JMW Turner  
 1856  
 Currently as the Tate Museum in Britain



*Right*  
*fig. 6*  
*Sea of Ice*  
 Caspar David Friedrich  
 1824  
 Currently in the Kunsthalle Hamburg





*fig. 7*  
*The Ninth Wave*  
Ivan Aivazovsky  
1850  
Currently at the State Russian Museum





Fig. 8  
*Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*  
JMW Turner  
1812  
Currently in the Tate Museum collection, London





fig. 9

*The Great Day of His Wrath*

John Martin

1853

Currently as the Tate Museum, Britain





fig. 10  
*The Ionian Dance*  
 Sir Edward John Poynter  
 1895



fig. 11  
*Winding the Skein*  
 Frederic Lord Leighton  
 1874 Currently at the Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney





fig. 12  
*Course of Empire*  
 (Clockwise from top left, *Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction*, *The Savage State*, *Desolation*)  
 Thomas Cole  
 1836  
 New York Historical Society





fig. 13  
*Voyage of Life*  
 (Clockwise from top left, *Childhood*, *Youth*, *Manhood*, *Old Age*)  
 Thomas Cole  
 1842  
 National Gallery, Washington DC



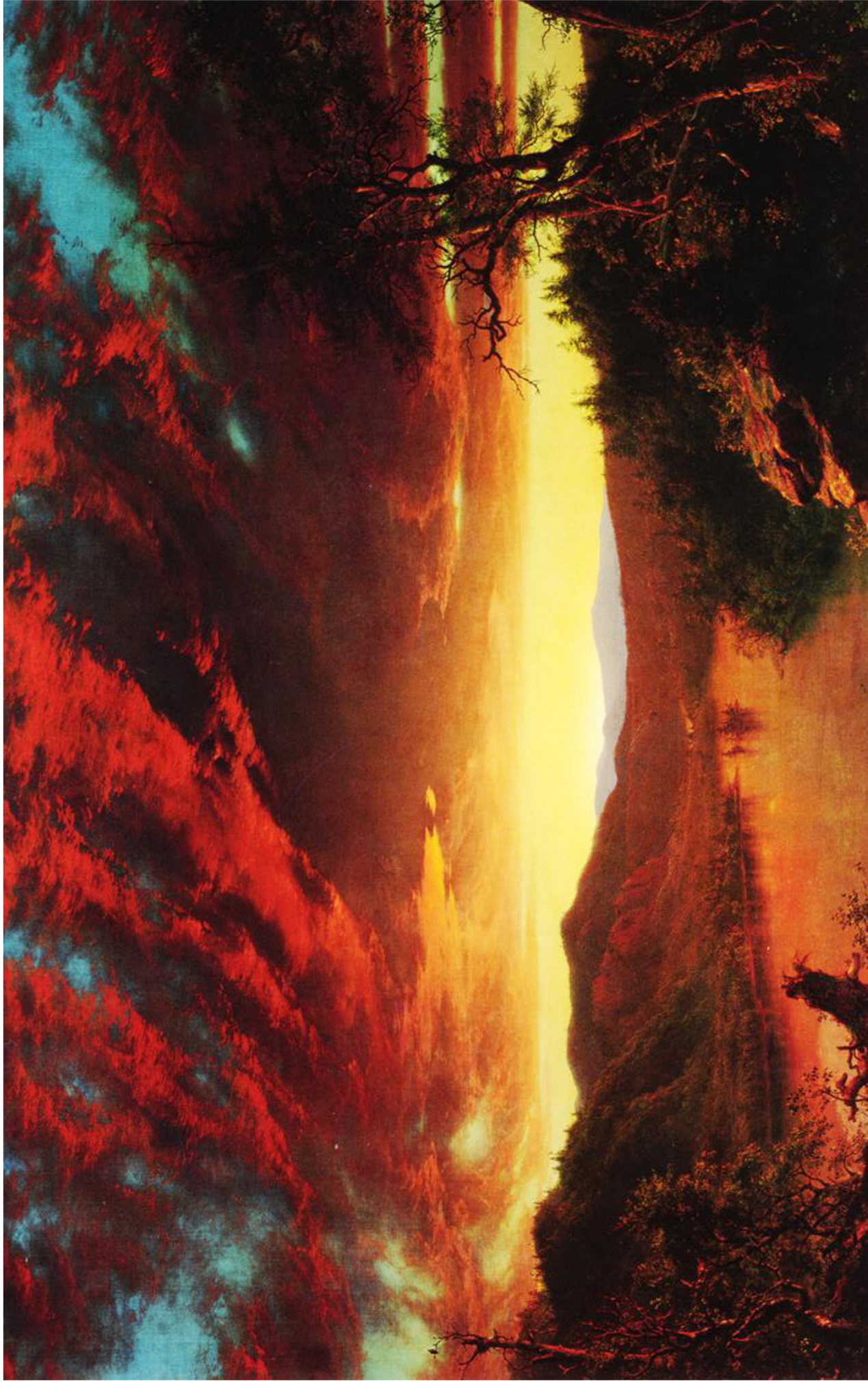


fig. 14

*Twilight in the Wilderness*

Frederic Edwin Church

1860

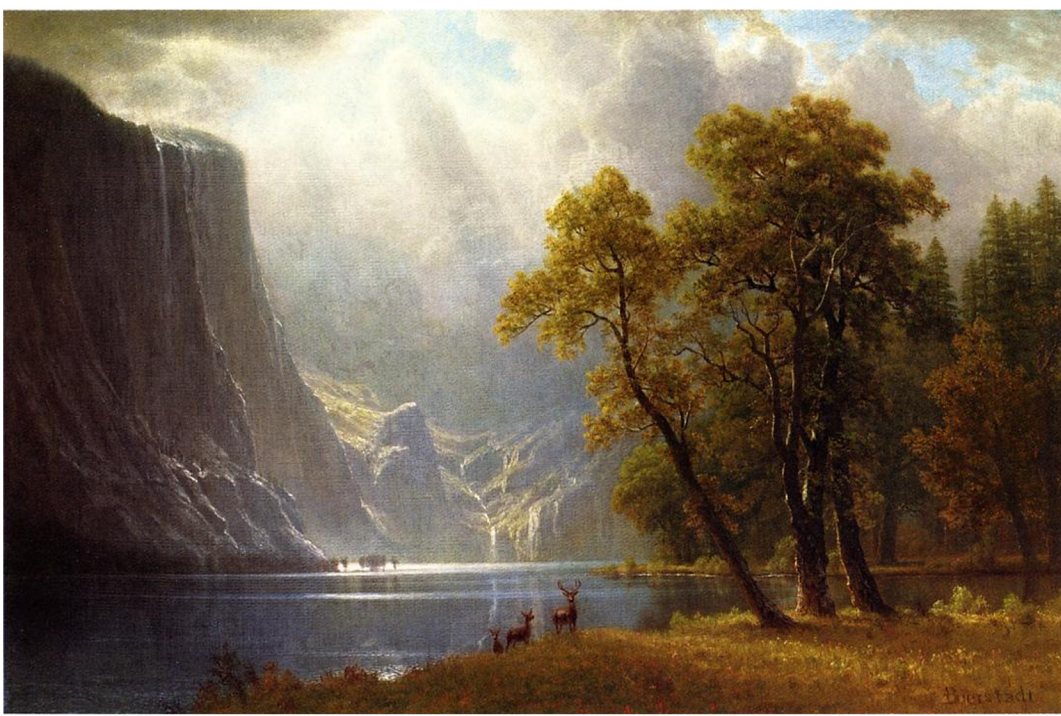
Currently at the Cleveland Museum of Art





*fig. 15*  
*Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*  
Albert Bierstadt  
1863  
Currently at the Fogg Museum, Cambridge MA.





*fig. 16*  
*Yosemite Valley*  
 Albert Bierstadt  
 Private Collection



*fig. 17*  
*Golden Light of California*  
 Albert Bierstadt  
 Private Collection



*fig. 18*  
*Estes Park Colorado*  
 Albert Bierstadt  
 1869  
 Private Collection





fig.19  
*Eaton's Neck, Long Island*  
John Frederick Kensett  
1872  
Currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





fig. 20  
*The Hunter's Return*  
 Thomas Cole  
 1845  
 Currently at the Amon Carter Museum, Forth Worth, TX

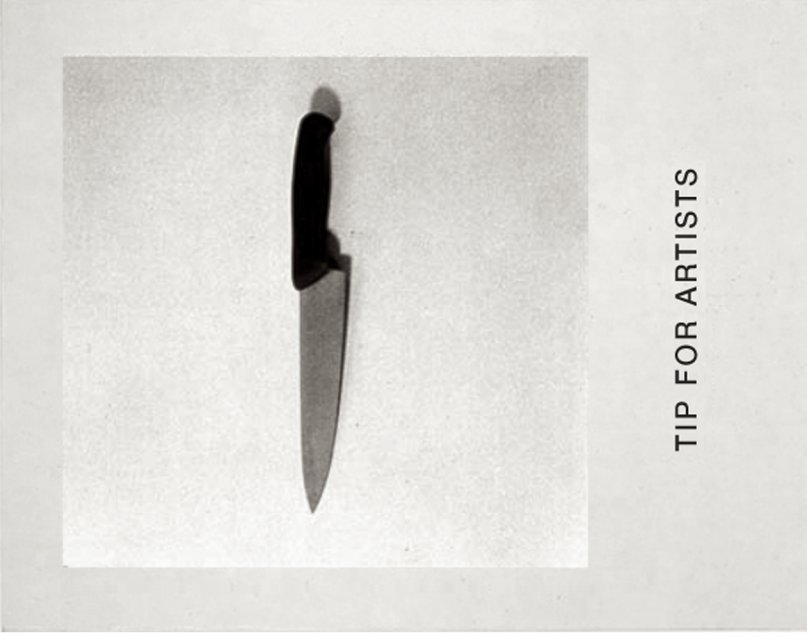


fig. 21  
*Away From it All*  
 Thomas Kinkadee  
 2012





fig. 22  
*I Asked My Wife What She Wanted For Her Birthday.*  
 Richard Prince  
 1986  
 Location unknown



TIP FOR ARTISTS



OTHER PEOPLE

fig. 24  
*Tip for Artists*  
 John Baldessari  
 1997

fig. 23  
*Other People*  
 John Baldessari  
 1997





fig. 25  
*Standard Station*  
 Ed Ruscha  
 1963  
 Hood Museum of art, Dartmouth College



fig. 26  
*Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*  
 Ed Ruscha  
 1962  
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York





fig. 27  
*Who Am I*  
 Ed Ruscha  
 1979  
 Private Collection

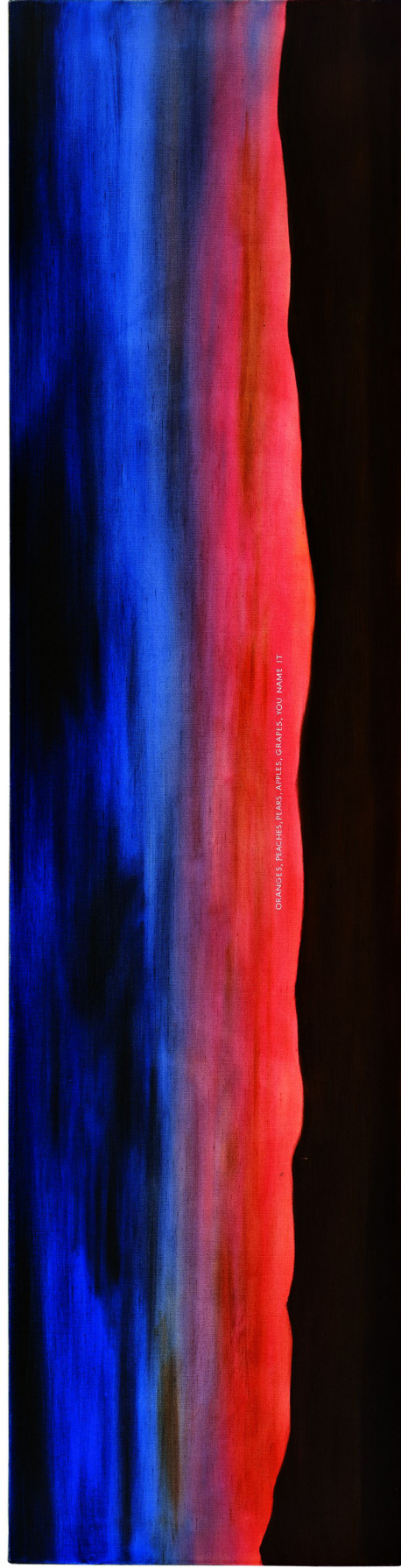


fig. 28  
*Oranges, Peaches, Pears, Apples, Grapes, You Name It*  
 Ed Ruscha  
 1977  
 Private Collection



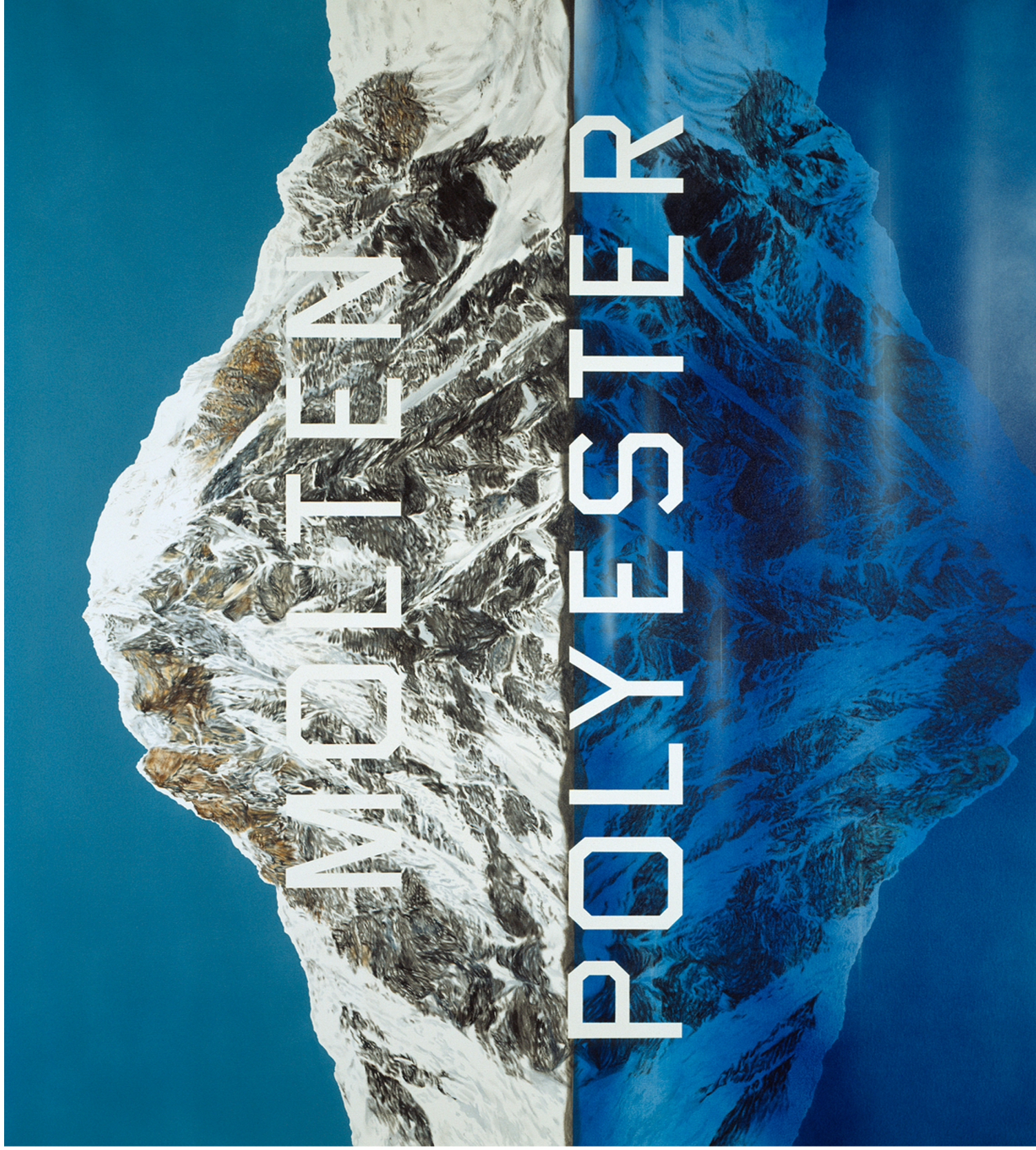


fig. 29

*Molten Polyester*

Ed Ruscha

2005

Denver Art Museum



fig. 30 (left)  
HI  
Kay Rosen  
1998  
Pennsylvania



fig. 31 (right)  
John Wilkes Booth  
Kay Rosen  
1987







fig. 32  
*Not My Slide*  
 Danielle Curran  
 2014

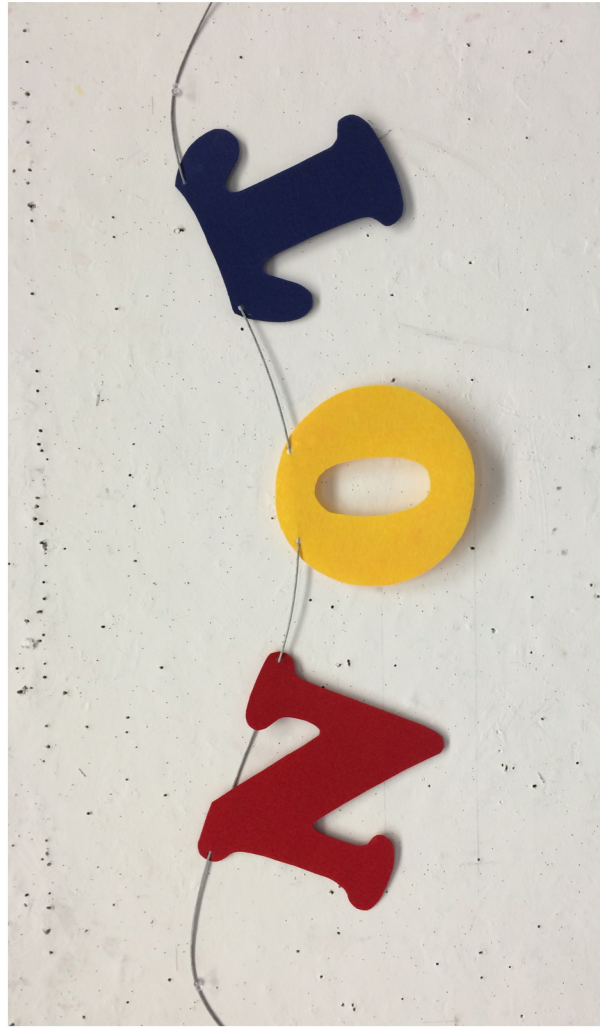


fig. 33  
*NOT*  
 Study for Larger Banner  
 Danielle Curran  
 2015



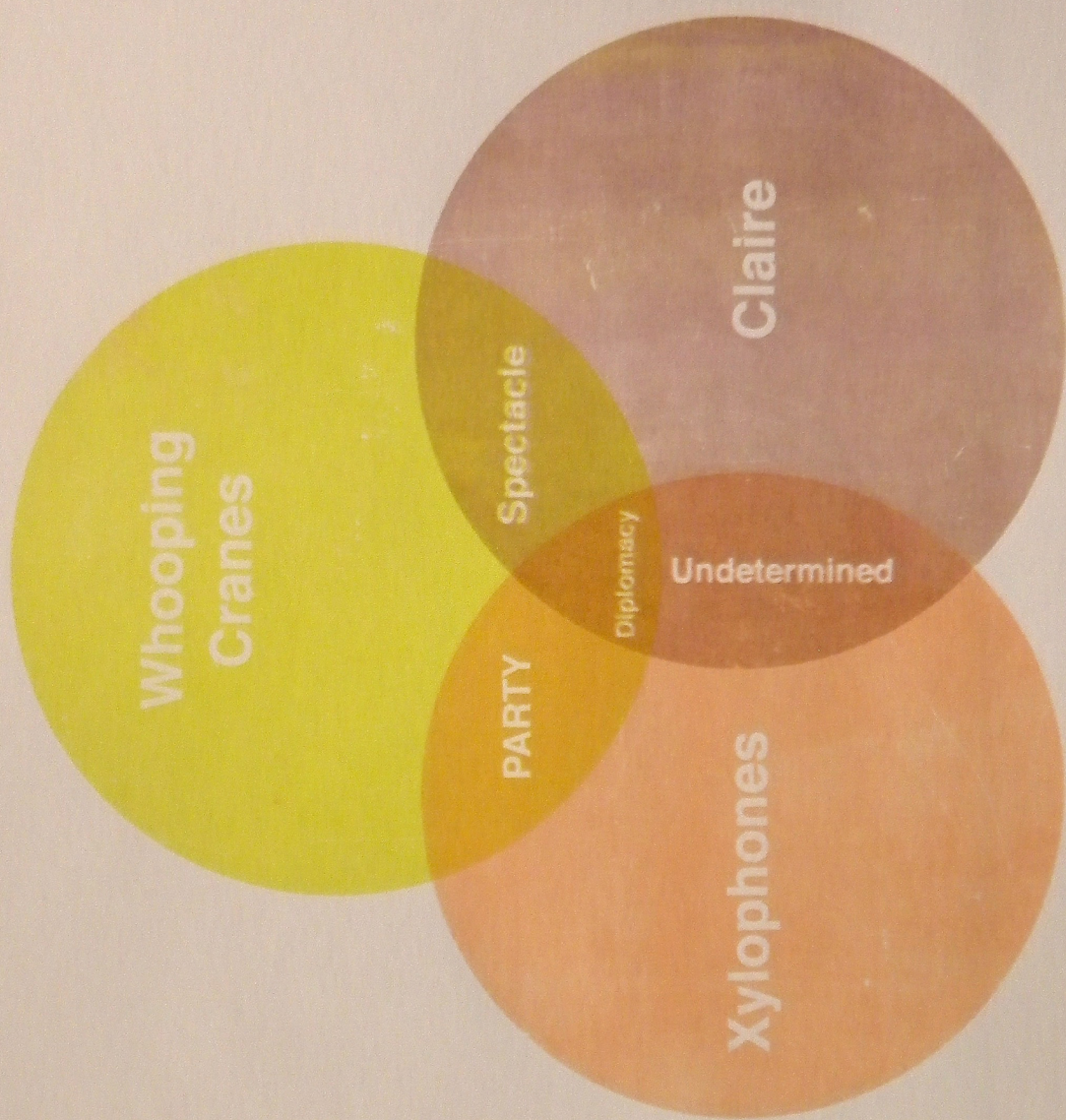


fig. 34  
*Whooping Cranes*  
Danielle Curran  
2015



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